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WHEN THE SKY RAINED UMBRELLAS

Margaret Guiness

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Margaret Guiness

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Remember

I am the girl who stood for hours
And endless days,
At the barbed wire fence
In the Death Camps.

I shall never forget the night,
My first night in the Camp,
Which turned my life
Into an endless night.

I shall never forget the billowing smoke
That poured from the chimneys
Of the roaring incinerators, ordered
Scientifically designed and built
To efficiently burn
The innocent bodies of our dead.

I shall never forget the frightened faces
Of all the children, whose bodies
I saw before my eyes,
As spirals ascending into the grieving sky,
Then falling to cover like white snow
The blood-stained ground,
And all that remained of me.

I shall never forget the flames
Which consumed my faith forever;
That cruelly robbed me,
For all eternity,
Of my love and joy for life.

I shall never forget the inhumanity
Of the evil Nazi guards,
Who laughed as they shot each child,
And stomped with their heavy boots
Upon the bodies of our sick,
Lying huddled on the wooden floor.

I shall never forget these disciples of Hitler,
Who not only murdered my family,
And countless millions of Jews,
But who also murdered my God,
And left me with a wounded soul,
Lost and forsaken forever.

I shall never forget my dreams
That assumed the countenance
Of the travailing desert,
Hearing voices crying out
For the Angel of Death.

I am the teenage girl who stood
Looking through the fence;
Who witnessed all this,
And kept deep within,
Desperately needing to release
My haunting fears and bitter tears,
For over fifty years.

Now you have heard my message
And shared my deepest thoughts.
All I ask of you, dear family and friends,
Is to keep alive this terrible truth,
For our world must NEVER,
NEVER forget.
It must never happen again!

DEDICATION

Dear Božena,

Through all these years, your spirit has always been a living part of me. How can I express my love for you? Only by dedicating my book to you can I truly express this love. That way you will live forever, and will never be forgotten.

You sacrificed your life to save mine. Only after World War II did I realize that if you had not taken me with you and assumed the role of my mother as we were escaping the deportations in our town, I, like so many children my age, would have been gassed and killed at Auschwitz.

Your courage and determination to stand up and not allow our murderers to take us like sheep to our death was truly heroic. Even though we were caught and made to suffer along with countless other Jewish people, I will forever admire the way you tried to defy the Nazi's murderous system.

To this day, I think of you as both my mother and sister. During those nightmare years you were more than a mother to me. You protected me. You taught me the true meaning of courage. Your wisdom in making all the right decisions kept me alive. You always knew that good would ultimately triumph over evil. It did, but at so great a cost that our words are inadequate to describe that terrible, evil time.

Even though during the more than 50 years between then and now your physical presence has been missing from my life, in spirit you have always been with me. Throughout the difficult periods, I have always silently spoken to you. I've listened and watched for signs from you when I've asked for your advice as I tried to make the right decisions. When joyous things have happened to me, I've always thanked you

for being my guardian angel.

I'm so sad that you were not able to share this great adventure called life. The freedom we dreamed of and talked about during our imprisonment is all we thought it would be. Falling in love, marrying, and having children were probably the happiest times in my life. Now both my son, Andy, and daughter, Ava Suzanne, are all grown up and adults.

I have never dared to take even one day of my life for granted. I've always needed desperately to find meaning in my own survival. I've always tried to make sure, as you taught me, to be kind to and caring of other people.

While living in Sweden, I worked at various hospitals as a training nurse. I saw you in every patient I took care of. My patients had the best care and love a nurse could provide. I was helping you in every one I attended.

I emigrated to the United States of America as you advised me to. It has been a great refuge for me and a healing place in which to live. I have lived in California since 1950. Each year, on the anniversary of your death, I hold a special remembrance for you. I light a candle that burns for 24 hours and sit Shiva. I sit low on the floor on pillows and reflect that day on the sadness of your loss and death. You were so young—only 29 years old—when you died.

The world calls our tragedy the Holocaust or the Shoah. It is considered the darkest period in human history. People realize now what happened, but no one can really understand it unless they were there, themselves, in the camps. Even we who endured the tortures were not fully aware of the enormity of the crimes the Nazis were committing against us innocent Jewish people and children. Many terrible events caused by humans and nature have occurred in the years since. Some have been compared to our tragedy, but no event really can be compared to that planned extermination of an

entire people.

There was an Orwellian cover-up, and today there are whole groups of people who deny that the planned annihilation of a people ever happened. I am sad to tell you that most of the Nazi criminals and murderers got away with it and were never brought to justice.

I am dedicating this book to you, my dear Božena. It will carry a message of responsibility that all of us are the guardians of life for one another. That deep existential truth is the core of my desire to write this book. I also feel that my mission as a survivor of such a dark period in human history is to be a witness to what happened during those nightmare years of 1940-1945.

Your loving sister,
Margo

Božena

1

DEATH IS EVERYWHERE

Death is everywhere. I am dying. I smell death. I feel death. My body is not mine anymore. I am just a collection of bones. I fall in and out of consciousness. When I am out of consciousness, I am hallucinating. I feel as if my body is being grated, the way Mother used to grate potatoes for potato pancakes. I feel so much pain. Sometimes I feel as if I am above my body looking down at it, not recognizing it any more as mine. I hear voices below surrounding my body. I hear people asking my sister, "Why do you bother her? Why don't you let her die in peace?" Then I hear my sister's voice, "I won't let her die." I am floating through a white tunnel—I like the feeling of being out of my body, of not feeling any more pain and being in a clean place.

How did I end up here? I am a 14-year-old girl. I have hardly begun my life; yet, it is ending. Despite all the efforts and resolutions I have made to stay alive and be a witness to this heinous crime, I have no choice—death is stronger than I am. I am dying. All around me in the barracks everyone is sick or dying. Of the thousands of people in the camp, I think only a few are barely alive.

Now I know why I am here in this death camp. Our illnesses are the result of systematic starvation, the result of a

careful plan by the German government to methodically starve us to death. It was a Nazi scheme from the very start to first work us and then kill us. We have only a temporary reprieve, while we work for the Nazis as their slaves. When we get too weak and can't work anymore, they starve us. The lucky people are those Father talked about who committed suicide prior to the deportation. I envy them. I have been in the executioner's house for over a year. After making every effort to survive so that I could tell the world about this hell, I am finally wishing for death.

I am dying, but watching myself die a slow death from starvation as lice eat at the open wounds that formed when I got typhus is the worst possible fate. I worry about my sister, Božena. She is lying next to me. She is the one who has taken care of me in the last few weeks. I hate to die and cause her additional pain. As far as I know, the two of us are the last members of our family to survive the camp. I am afraid that if I die, she will give up. She won't have any reason to survive. We have been supporting each other through this hell on earth created for our destruction.

At an earlier state, there used to be a work unit comprised of fellow prisoners. They were still strong enough to carry the dead from the barracks, but now the dead are all around us. Seeing all my friends dead is horrible. People with whom we had been in the camps for a long time felt that I would pull through. I had so much life force. They sent messages with me to give to relatives or their children, whom they had hid with Christian families prior to their deportation.

I cannot deliver them. I am wasting away. I have diarrhea. I can no longer control my bowel functions. I cannot make it to the latrines. The excrement flows uncontrollably from my body onto the dirt floor where I lie covered with

my lice-infected blanket. The smell of excrement and death that surround me is indescribable. Because of having been coddled and protected all my life before, this is the worst nightmare imaginable for me.

I am hallucinating again. I have the typhus that has swept through the concentration camp like lightning, killing most of the people in its path. Typhus is a killer. I have a high fever but nothing to measure it with and no medication to bring it down. Black blisters on my body have become open sores, and the lice are feeding on them. I am glad that I am unconscious most of the time. When I am somewhat lucid, I look for my sister. I try to reassure her that I am still among the living. She cries when she hears my voice and keeps reassuring me that I will make it through this terrible illness. However, I can hear in her voice that she is not sure, either. When I talk to her, I have a new resolve to try to stay alive, but I am not sure that I can.

It is morning, and mornings offer me a glimmer of hope. Another day has passed, and I am still alive. Now I worry about my sister. Who will look after her if I die? I love her so much, and I wish that this hell we are living in would end. I am thinking of other members of my family. Are they as sick as I? I wish they were here to comfort me and assure me that they are fine. I wish that all this is only a bad dream, and when I wake up, I will be reunited with my whole family.

I've lost all sense of time since becoming sick with typhus. Sometimes I cannot tell if it's day or night. In the daytime there is some movement in the barracks among those who are still alive. I see people crawling on all fours, like wounded animals, toward the latrines. They don't have the strength to stand anymore. I cry. I have never seen this sight before—people crawling on their hands and knees. Dante's

Inferno was a vacation place compared to this. Oh, God, why have you forsaken us? I am grateful to be unconscious most of the time so I don't have to continually face this indescribable sight

Just before I woke up, I dreamed that I was at home, and all my family was gathering for the Passover Seder. The table was beautifully set with special dishes reserved only for Passover. We read the Hagaddah and I, being the youngest, asked the four questions. I wished that Father would hurry up and finish the prayers so we could eat our festive dinner. I smelled the wonderful aromas coming from the kitchen, the food that Mother had prepared for this special occasion. I woke up before I got to eat

I have not dreamed of food for a long time. I must be getting better. It won't help me, for there is no food to be had here unless a miracle happens and we are liberated.

2

MY THOUGHTS RETURN TO HOW IT USED TO BE

I think that it is spring already, although it is still very cold and it rains every day. I daydream about spring. I used to love spring. I looked forward to it, starting at New Year's. By then I had grown tired of having to stay indoors. I would be restless and couldn't wait to go outside and ride my bike into the hills. I'd gather violets and lilies of the valley and bring them home to Mother. She was delighted when I brought her spring flowers.

It was in the spring that the German invasion of our country took place. I was nine years old. I remember it clearly. It seems to me that our lives changed overnight. We had curfews; after eight o'clock in the evening we were not allowed to be out. We were only allowed to shop for groceries during certain hours after most of the Christian people had already shopped. Getting food—our standing in line for it and the store running out of stock—was a steady subject of conversation. It replaced talking about the weather. We all became undernourished.

Father always looked worried. The anti-Jewish propaganda started immediately, and it fired up a wave of latent

Margo: 1938, just prior to German occupation

anti-Semitism. Julius Streicher, the editor of one of the leading newspapers in Berlin, *Der Sturmer*, coined the phrase "The Jews are our misfortune," printed in bold black letters an inch and a half high, and it was copied in our local newspaper.

On my way to school, I saw signs all over our city proclaiming "The Jews' death will eliminate the country's misery." In parks and public places I saw signs posted: "Jews and dogs are not allowed." Many of the signs I saw referred to the "Jewish Problem."

"What was the problem?" I used to ask Father.

"It's just anti-Semitic propaganda," he always assured me. It was when we were ordered to wear the Jewish Star on our outer clothing at all times that everyone started to really

worry. We felt isolated and humiliated. We knew instinctively that we were at the mercy of very ruthless men. Shortly, the most important members in the Jewish community were taken hostage by the Gestapo. Among the many hostages the Germans arrested were my sister Mania, her husband, Zoltan Spira, and my sister Agnes Wohl. Mania and Zoltan had been able to hold onto their car dealership and repair shop despite the anti-Jewish laws that started even before the German occupation of Czechoslovakia. Zoltan Spira was exempted from the anti-Jewish laws because of his business. After the occupation, the Germans disregarded the exemption.

The sum of money that was demanded for the release of the hostages was the equivalent of either a million dollars or one kilogram of gold. The Jewish community could not gather that amount of money from the then impoverished Jewish people. Therefore, it was decided that the ransom would be paid in gold. I remember that on our street the women took off their wedding rings in order to gather the gold. They were willing to part with their most precious possessions just to free the hostages. The gold took weeks to collect. The deadline for the ransom payment passed. When all the gold was finally gathered from Jewish families, Father said, "It isn't even close to the sum the Gestapo have demanded. Still they've accepted the gold." The hostages were never released.

One day when Father came back from the morning prayers, he gathered the older members of the family and said, "A ghetto is being set up on the outskirts of the city. The place they chose is an abandoned brick factory. There are mass suicides among our people in the city. People don't want to participate in their own relocation. You know, some families even took poison. Some jumped from their apart-

ments to their deaths."

I was excluded from the meetings when such discussions took place. Since I was the youngest in our family, they didn't want to frighten me. But still I heard what they said. I remember everyone in our family believed that the Jews were being resettled for work somewhere in the eastern part of Poland. It was still not known by most people that the resettlement would result in their death and destruction. I heard Father say, "Germany is getting fat from all they take away from us. First, they freeze our bank accounts; then, our insurance policies are canceled. What's to become of us? The police declared today that we have lost our human rights. No matter what happens, they will not protect us. We seem to be getting more and more isolated from the rest of human society."

I continue to fantasize that I am back home again, and I am at school. I am very proud of being promoted to the gymnasium after only four years of elementary school. I am the youngest one in my class. I don't mind that at all. My only regret is that I am in an all girls' school. None of the high schools are coeducational. I would like to get to know boys better.

All my friends have young mothers. I envy them. Also, my friends have small families. I want to be in a small family. That way I could have more attention from Mother. But I love all my brothers and sisters. I'm like a toy to them. They play rough with me sometimes. Once the roughhousing resulted in my getting a deep cut on my thigh from the scissors my older brother Lacko (Ladislav) had in his pants' pocket. I was bleeding, so he got scared. Mother would bawl him out, if she knew. He and my sister Agnes dressed the bleeding cut, and I said nothing to Mother.

Life was eventful in our home; there were always crises

to deal with. My mother had very little time for herself or me. I had to accept it. The benefit of having this large family outweighed the negatives for me.

Of my earliest memories, I only remember my internal dialogue. I don't think that I was saying too much at age two. What I remember is going to visit my grandparents with Mother every year in the summer. Those visits lasted for weeks. At first I found it strange walking on the unpaved roads in the village. I grew up in a city. But village life held a lot of mysteries for me.

I was five when Mother took me on our last visit to Grandfather. It was the first time Grandpa took me along on his daily trip to the neighboring villages. Farming was his main occupation. He earned extra money from his egg farm. Along with the eggs he collected each day from his own chicken coop, he bought up the eggs from most of the local farmers. Every morning before dawn, Grandpa took his horse and small buggy loaded with straw and traveled through the neighboring villages. Farmers' wives were waiting for him by the roadside with their eggs for sale. Occasionally, he would bargain about the price. Sometimes the eggs were smaller than usual—that was when Grandpa argued the most. When we returned home, still in the early morning hours, Grandpa fitted the eggs into large crates. Then, he sent the crates off to Prague, the capital city, for distribution.

Then, we were back at the house. The dark morning was clearing, the morning sun trying to break through the clouds, a heavy fog in the village still seeming to engulf it Grandpa said, "Why don't you go back to bed for a while? You got up early this morning."

"But, Grandpa, you promised that I could help you put the eggs in crates," I answered.

"You promised! A promise is a promise!"

"You promised you'd let me help."

"You are very insistent. You'd better get a very patient husband!"

"I am not going to get married," I replied.

After that visit, I never saw my grandfather again. I remember the sad exchange of letters between Mother and her father just after the occupation. He wrote, "The Christian neighbors won't sell me anything. I can't buy flour or sugar no matter how much money I offer. I think I'll be happier when the Mongols resettle us somewhere in the east." Grandfather referred to the German invasion as the "Mongol" invasion. There were legends that were put into verse about the story of the actual Mongol invasion. We had memorized them in school.

In 1943, all the Ritters, my family in Grandfather's village were deported to Auschwitz. My uncle and four cousins, who lived just across the street from Grandfather, were all taken away.

The German invasion was equally cruel, but everyone was shocked that a civilized nation such as Germany displayed openly their real intent toward two minorities, the Jews and the Gypsies. We were persecuted from almost the first day after the Germans came.

My memory comes back in spurts: "Mother, please don't stop reading," I beg. "Please read another page." Mommy is sitting on the edge of my bed with the book in her lap. She won prizes for her good storytelling while she was in school. Also, she's had 25 years of experience reading to all her children. She is still the best story reader because she gets excited about each story. We live in Košice, Czechoslovakia. It is summer and I am three. Sometimes in the daytime under the big cherry tree I pretend to be a rich child. I put on my best party dress and secretly pretend that I'm living with

1933: Stropkov, Slovakia
Bottom row: child standing second from left, Margo; Woman third from left, Margo's mother; Woman fourth from left, Margo's grandmother. All others in photo are Margo's aunts and cousins. No one in photo survived in the Holocaust except Margo.

a rich family, and I am always dressed like that. My mother breaks into my daydreams, "You've got to go to sleep," she says. "Don't cry. You sound like a baby when you cry."

"I'm thirsty! Please bring me some water," I whine.

"I'll bring you some after I have put your sister Agnes to bed."

I draw my covers around me, and I try to stay awake. I listen to sounds from the next room. I fall asleep before Mother brings me the water. She leaves it on my night table but puts a cloth under the glass.

My mother was very meticulous. When I asked her why she was so protective of the heavy furniture, she said, "You are too young to appreciate antique furnishings." I never thought of our furniture as anything but old-fashioned. I would have been happier if we'd had modern furniture. I always liked everything new. I hated the Persian rugs, with all their vibrant colors, that were scattered all over the parquet floors. I would have preferred just a plain-colored rug. My mother tried to explain to me the value of those rugs. She said that she had inherited them from her mother. I still wasn't impressed. I always wished that I'd had younger parents. They were both antiquated in my eyes, and, in fact, my mother was 39 when I was born. I was the last of ten children.

Gossip was rampant in our small town in Czechoslovakia. Rumors circulated swiftly, and when I was born, my mother feared people might assume my 20-year-old sister, Charlotte, was the mother of an illegitimate child. To protect her and ward off such an unfair accusation, my birth was kept a secret. I was hidden in a closet so drop-in visitors would not be aware that I was there.

However, my existence was not a secret for long. I made sure of that by exercising my lungs in protest at being put

aside. Young as I was, my screams were heard, and my sisters and brothers came to my rescue. I soon became a recognized member of the family. As I developed into an exceptionally pretty infant, my mother's superstitions created new worries. The fear of strangers casting an evil eye in my direction encouraged her to go through extreme rituals of a Slavic nature. As a result, my room had pieces of charcoal strategically placed to ward off bad spirits. As I grew older, I became aware that before being taken out for a stroll, Mother had to perform her rituals to discourage the demons. The one I especially remember was her tying a red ribbon under the carriage.

In my memory I am once again only three years old. I am always being held in someone's lap and kissed. I am handed from lap to lap. Some people have very rough beards that hurt my tender skin. I often hide under the table to avoid being kissed by the bearded men. I can see the big dining room and the walnut table. All the important family events take place at this table.

Now, I'm close to four years old. I'm asking my sisters and brothers to read to me at bedtime. I always have to beg them. I need to learn how to read! Maybe someone will teach me. I'll ask my brothers and sisters tomorrow. Everyone in my family knows how to read, so I want to learn, too. Leslie and Agnes, my next older brother and sister, are doing their homework. They promise to teach me to read after they finish their school assignments. Hooray! I won't have to beg anymore. I'll read my own stories at bedtime. I love books. My favorite ones are *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Hansel and Gretel*. The way the children in those stories manage to survive and find their way home always fascinates me. I hope that someday I will find my way home. I feel happier when I think about home. It helps to occupy my mind when I am

awake. My ability to forget the present misery I am in, even for a short time, has a calming affect on me. At least in my head I am able to escape from this hell.

Suddenly I am jolted into the year 1944, before the deportation, when my sister Božena and I are trying to run for cover before we have to report to the Ghetto. Božena tries to convince our father to come along with us into hiding. I hear them talk about the Russian front being very close to our town. She says, "Father, all you have to do is shave off your beard. We'll get some false papers for you, and no one will know that you are a Jew."

"I'm not going to move to the Ghetto," Božena says. "I have arranged with our cleaning lady, Kathy, to give us her and her daughter's documents in exchange for all our household goods. I'm taking Margo with me. We will go to Budapest, Hungary. There, with a population of over a million people, we'll be able to hide. I hope we'll be safe; no one knows us there. I'll get a job as a bookkeeper, and Margo can get some work caring for children. She has had lots of experience helping with Mania's children. Both Mania's children, George and Eva-Suzanne, adore her, and she is like an older sister to them. I tried to pick up Mania's children today and take them along with us. I called their nanny yesterday and told her that I was picking up the children. I didn't mention the reason. I pretended that it was a visit. But by the time I got to the house, Fraulein had already notified the Gestapo. The children were both taken away by the Gestapo just minutes before I got there."

"Imagine such a betrayal from the woman who has been taking care of them," Father says. "At least they will be together with their parents. They'll look after them."

Božena tries again to assure Father, saying "We'll be able to support ourselves. We speak Hungarian fluently, and

All three murdered at Auschwitz

Margo's sister Mania and daughter Eva-Suzanne

Mania and son George

we can find jobs."

Father replies, "I think you are a brave and courageous girl. I have always believed in you. I am an old man now. I wish to place my own fate in God's hands. I don't have your courage anymore to run and hide. I feel helpless that I can no longer protect you. Come closer, Božena and Margo. I'll give you my blessings for a safe and successful journey." Father first places both his hands on top of Božena's head and recites a blessing in Hebrew. It is my turn to receive his blessing. This time his voice breaks when he places his hands on top of my head. I ask him, "Father, why are you crying?"

He answers me, "I hate to see my family so scattered. You are so young, and it is my place to look after you." Then he turns to my sister and says to her, "You are right not to follow the German orders. I hope that God will be with you to protect you. The Germans are retreating. The Russian army is at their heels. Any day now the German army will capitulate. They don't have a chance to win this war. Come back home at the end of the war, and we will all meet here. Take really good care of Margo. She is still so young, and I am sad that she has to go through all this. Please be very kind to her."

How can my young mind begin to understand my father's position? It seems to me such a simple thing for him to shave off his beard. How can I know what shaving off a beard means to him? Being an Orthodox Jew requires that he not be clean-shaven. So it was written in the Old Testament. As a clean-shaven man, even for a short time, he can't consider himself an observant Orthodox Jew and cannot live with himself if he feels he has betrayed his faith.

In the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp I would meet a large group of women and children who were Jehovah's Witnesses and were also guided by the conviction of their

faith. They could have gained their freedom from the camp if they denounced their faith; yet, they stubbornly refused—and as a result they perished.

Božena and I still have another hurdle to overcome. She says, "We don't want to stay at our house overnight because the evacuations to the Ghetto might begin tonight in our district." Božena is fearful of contacting her best non-Jewish friend, Marta, and tells me, "If she turns us down, I will lose her as a friend. If she puts us up for the night, I might put her in jeopardy." Božena decides to go uptown to my aunt's apartment. The part of the city where our aunt lives has been already evacuated and the apartment is closed off with a very official-looking seal.

Božena packs a few belongings for both of us. She takes a little money and little jewelry with her. Her aim is to look like a poor widow with a daughter to support.

I think of my fourteenth birthday, just a month ago, when there was still some normalcy to our lives. I can see the room where the party took place, in the salon of our house. That is the only room with groupings of tables and chairs placed around them. The wall on one side has a floor-to-ceiling vitrine with Rosenthal China service for 12, a silver chalice, the Chanukah Menorah, as well as the Havdalah silver pieces used with spices that signal the end of the Shabbat ritual. Persian rugs over polished parquet floors add color to the room. The rest of the room contains original landscape paintings in gilded carved-wood frames hung in museum style.

At the party my many friends feasted on open-faced sandwiches of anchovy and eggs, caviar, pink salmon, and gourmet cheeses. Then came the desserts of chocolate-filled and creamed pastries from the most elegant pastry shop in town, called the Espresso. Of all the gifts I received, the

most memorable are the red carnation and box of chocolates presented by my first admirer. The teasing by my older sisters and brothers embarrassed me terribly. I can hear the taunts, "How come you get flowers in February when we don't, and candy too! Wow! You must have something we don't." My sisters Agnes and Božena chided me endlessly. My most prized gift of all was my bright, shiny, chrome bicycle with multicolored netting on the back wheels to prevent skirts from catching in the spokes. I'm crushed that I have to leave it behind, and I haven't even been able to ride it yet. The weather has been awful; it rained almost every day last month. Besides, if I ride a new bicycle with my Jewish star on my coat, it will be visible to anybody, and someone can easily take my bicycle away from me. I've been waiting every day for the war to end so I can take it out of the house. Now, who knows when we'll get to go home again? Someone will probably steal my bicycle before I get to ride it. I am near tears thinking about it.

Božena says to me, "Now you need to learn your new name. It is Maria Karolchik, and you are 17 years old. You'll have to act older and you'll have to call me 'Mother' from now on, even when we are alone, so you'll get used to it. The new name on my papers," she says, "is Katherine. I am 37 years old, and I am your mother. I will make all our decisions, and please don't argue with me. Don't try to do anything or talk to anyone without first checking with me. This may be hard for you because I know that you have a mind of your own. Just remember that this is only temporary. Look at it as an adventure. Father said this war will be over soon, and then we can return to a normal life."

Like two very naive burglars, we carefully open up the seal on my aunt's apartment. We are even afraid to turn on the lights. We are fearful of the neighbors reporting us to

the authorities if we're discovered in the sealed-off apartment They are aware that the Jewish Landau families have been taken to the Ghetto. I stumble in the darkness trying to find my way to the bathroom. It creates a lot of noise. After Božena bawls me out, I settle down for some sleep.

The train to Budapest runs only once a day, at ten o'clock in the morning. We have to catch it. We carefully walk to the main train station, just in time to board the train. I am still very young, and I don't fully understand why we have left home. The weather is cold and rainy. It's the end of March, and it is still raining every day.

My new name, Maria Karolchik, is easy for me to adopt. Having instantly become 17 is fun. All of this appears to me as a great adventure.

About an hour after the train departs, it suddenly comes to a stop. A large group of Hungarian police with special tall-feathered hats board the train. They examine everyone's documents carefully and have us open up our suitcases for inspection. We pass, and my sister emits a big sigh of relief when they finally leave the train.

Arriving in Budapest, we check into a pension, a boarding house, hoping later to find an apartment. We need money for our survival. Within days, Božena finds a job as a bookkeeper. I find work as a salesgirl selling cosmetics in a drugstore. The only thing that is hard is to find is a furnished apartment, so we decide to stay and live in the pension.

Božena won't allow me to have much contact with strangers or make any friendships with people at work or in the pension. I spend a lot of my free time in our room reading books, my favorite pastime.

Life in Budapest is filled with wonders for me. I love the city. Palaces and churches are in Buda, the residential part of the city. The Pest side, where we work and live, is

more of the commercial part. In between the divided city flows the Danube River, and though not blue the way Johann Strauss described it, it's still lovely. Statues of Hungarian kings and their descendants, going back thousands of years, adorn the huge plazas and parks. Summer concerts are held almost daily in a large park on the small Margarita Island, just at walking distance from the city's center.

Božena and I meet every day for our noon meal at different and affordable restaurants. This is our only meal of the day because our budget won't allow for more. We keep fruit and biscuits in our room for night snacks.

Božena seems to find the isolation from people harder to bear than I do. She meets a young woman in our pension from Belgrade, Yugoslavia, and becomes friends with her. They spend evenings together talking politics, either in our room or in the Yugoslav lady's room. I don't pay much attention to the conversation, although since living in Budapest, I've become more aware of what we are running away from. In a sort of disguised way, the newspapers and radio are reporting the murder of Jewish people. I cannot believe all I hear and decide that the news is being overdramatized.

We follow an established routine every day. We are careful not to arouse any suspicion. After our noon meal we return to work and usually meet again at the pension in the evening. On Sundays, we visit friends who work at the one still-existing Jewish hospital in Buda. Sometimes we go to the movies, my favorite entertainment.

3

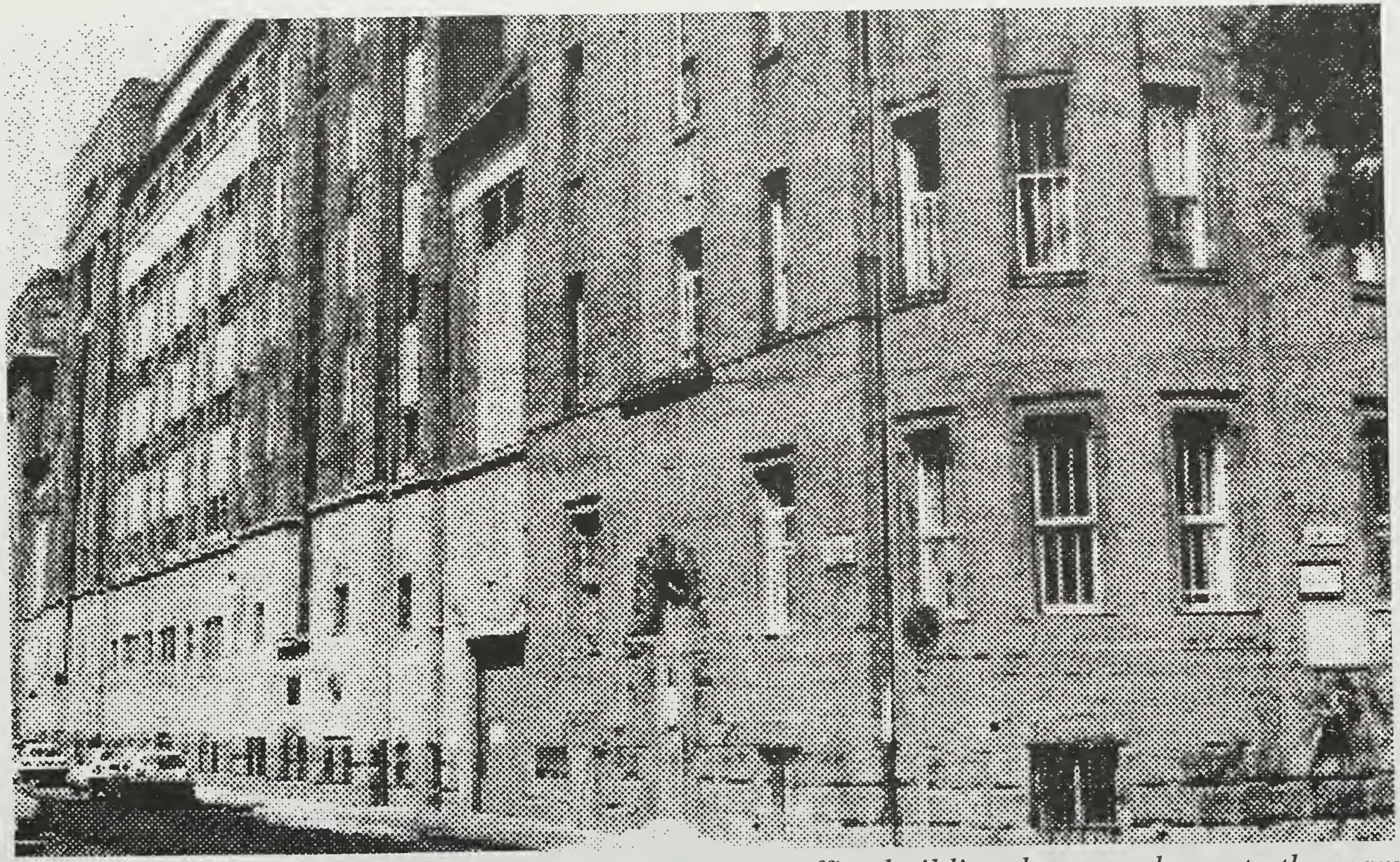
INTERROGATIONS

We've been living in Budapest for several months, and this particular evening, after the movies, we return to the pension. Guests are sitting and playing cards in the formal salon. Everyone greets us cordially. That is rather unusual, for we are not part of the weekly card-playing group. When we enter our room, the Gestapo is going through our belongings, and the room looks as if a cyclone has hit it.

With their expert eyes and lots of experience, the Gestapo agents find a second set of documents that we had sewn inside the lining of a purse. This second set of documents, also made out to a mother and daughter, is the most damaging evidence they find against us. Promptly, we are both placed under arrest and, in a car we hadn't noticed waiting downstairs, we are taken to a building on Fö Utca, in Buda. It's the Gestapo prison.

It is a mild evening outside, yet my teeth are chattering and my skin has turned to ice. I am filled with terror.

The first interrogation is conducted calmly. Then, when the agents see that they can't get anywhere with me, I am slapped repeatedly by my interrogator. He is a German officer. I can't make out his rank by the insignia on his uniform. He has a stern face and steel gray hair. His eyes are a piercing blue. He slaps me when he can't get the answers



GESTAPO PRISON — Former Gestapo prison, now an office building, bears a plaque to the many victims of the German Nazi occupation of Hungary

Present day street leading to the Gestapo prison named "Martyr's Way"

out of me that he wants to hear. My head is reeling from his slaps. He lights a cigarette and holds it under my chin. I smell my flesh burning before I feel the pain. I know that I have to endure it, and I am able to block out the pain for a while.

After a time, I realize that the Gestapo is not nearly as interested in me being a spy as they are to ascertain whether I am a Jewish girl trying to hide. They are hunting us down like the worst kind of animals.

The terror and fear of that first night stays with me. It leaves an indelible imprint on my psyche. Božena and I are booked as serious political prisoners. We are separated and taken to cells at opposite ends of the large prison. I am shoved into a cell with two cots in it. There is another person occupying the second cot. I am terrified. I cannot fully comprehend our misfortune of having been arrested. I can't close my eyes. The cot I am trying to rest on is filled with bedbugs. I am terrified of them. I am sad that we were not free for very

long and spend hours worrying about further interrogation. Finally, I fall asleep.

In the morning, I meet my cell mate. Her name is Vera. She is from Poland. My first impression of Vera is that she was placed in my cell to spy on me. She questions me a lot. I tell her that I don't understand German very well and have her repeat her questions at least twice. This gives me time to think over my answers.

My second interrogation takes place at 11 o'clock in the morning. This time there is a Hungarian lady there who serves as my interpreter. She repeats the Gestapo officer's questions to me in Hungarian. I don't answer the questions. I keep repeating that they've made a mistake in arresting my mother and me. I say I am a schoolgirl, not a spy, not a Jew. After that I have nothing to say. My silence seems to drive my interrogators insane. I am taken back to my cell.

The following day I am brought back for questioning again. The scene in the interrogating room has changed. This time there are three Hungarian men doing the questioning. They belong to a pro-Nazi party, the Hungarian Arrow Cross. They have me strip off my clothes. It is the first time that I am seen naked by men. I have to quickly get used to it. When I don't answer the avalanche of questions they fire at me, they deliver punches to my bare skin. They are brutal. They don't punch my breasts, which must remind them of their wives or girlfriends.

So far, I am able to survive the beatings. Will it ever end? I resolve that they'll never get another word out of me, that I will remain silent. I worry constantly about betraying my sister. I am almost never free of that fear. No matter what I say, they'll want more.

I master numbing my brain to the pain when I am beaten. I am returned to my cell, but my body aches from the beat-

ings. I collapse on my cot. This time I am convinced that Vera is a spy. She questions me relentlessly. Between the pressure in the interrogation room and my cell, I wonder what will be my breaking point. Vera tells me that in Poland they make soap out of Jews. I don't believe her. Why does she want to scare me? Why is she so mean to me? She must have been put up to it, I figure. There must be something in it for her.

During our afternoon one-hour walk around the prison courtyard, Božena tells me quietly about her cell mates and the conditions she has to face. We try to talk quietly so we don't attract the attention of the guards. Božena asks me a lot of questions about the interrogations. I don't tell her too much about the abuse I am subjected to. I don't want to worry her. It seems to me that she is better off than I am. Her cell mates are not as hostile to her as Vera is to me. Božena is in a cell with five other inmates. All of them are from either Holland or Belgium. I wish I could also be in a larger cell, but there is not much I can do about changing. The best I can do is try to survive both my cell mate's questions and the interrogations.

A week later I am brought back for further questioning. This time my interrogator is a young Hungarian man, Mr. Nagy, also a member of the Arrow Cross. He is in his late twenties. I am filled with fear. It has taken me all this time to recuperate from the beatings of the previous week's interrogations.

Before he has a chance to start questioning me, I ask him "Why did you join the Arrow Cross group?"

He answers spontaneously, "I just wanted to have a gun and fight. I don't agree completely with the German policy, the way they treat Jews—I don't hate them myself. But I agree that we should resettle them in the eastern part of Po-

land. There they can no longer loot and steal from the Hungarian People. You are Jewish, aren't you?" he asks me. "No, I am not,"' I reply. "Then you must be a spy?" "No, I am not a spy. I am a student at the Gymnasium, and next spring I'll be graduating."

"You will be executed if you don't tell me the truth."

"I am glad you tell me this, for I am telling the truth. Can I have a pen and a piece of paper? I want to tell my family and friends goodbye. What about my mother's fate? Will she be executed, too, on the trumped-up charges?"

"I think so," Mr. Nagy says.

"Will it be my last drive when you take me back to the prison from here?"

"I don't know. It depends on your answers. If you cooperate with us and tell us the truth, you will be better off," he says. To keep him from asking me more questions, I ask him things about his life.

Two German officers enter and hold a private conversation with my interrogator. I overhear them talk about Jews and the fate that awaits them. There is a loud noise coming from somewhere in the building. I wonder what is going on.

The German officers tell my interpreter to find out if I am Jewish. He answers them, "We must be patient. You can see that she is very young, almost still a child." "We have been patient long enough," they yell. "There is a death warrant out for all the Jews. Those are the ones we need to get, don't bother with any other questions. Just find out if she is Jewish. We need to catch the Jews, especially those who are trying to hide."

Catching Jews is their highest priority, I realize, and so I resolve not to say anything. He hits me, and his fist lands on my nose. I stare at my interrogators unseeingly. "You swine, you Jew, tell us who you really are."

All three men start hitting me again. "For the last time, tell us why you had that second set of documents sewn inside your purse? Are you a spy? Maybe we've been asking you the wrong questions. We will continue hitting you until you tell us the truth."

The Hungarian interrogator leaves the room. I feel as if there is a break in his solidarity with the two German officers. I think that he believes me.

The German officers' desire to strike me increases. I get hit harder each time. I seem to be choking on blood running down my throat. It sounds like a gurgle. I get hit even harder. My cries are punctuated by the blows I receive. I try to avoid them, but they all land. My torturers seem indefatigable. I wonder why they keep hitting me. Do they get extra pay? I've never been able to understand men's ability to strike another person. These German officers do it as if it's their job or their duty.

"Please, please, I am not a Jew and I am not a spy," I cry out.

I am afraid that I am dying. I hurt so much that I wonder what my breaking point will be, but I keep silent. Only my sobs break the silence in the room. My face is smeared with blood. I can feel it. When the German officers bark questions at me, I pretend that my tongue is burned and I cannot speak. The two German officers are tireless in their questioning. I only know that I must remain silent. Their sarcastic questions fill the silence.

Then, I am driven back to the Fö Utca prison in Budapest from Schwab Hegy, which is Eichmann's headquarters. They have given up on me, I think hopefully. Back in my cell, dazed from the beating, I try to sleep. Sleep is my only escape from the harshness of my imprisonment. When I wake up, I am bothered by the bedbugs in my cell. Even the bed-

bugs on my cot cling to life when I try to kill them. They hide under the cover. So what if I was born Jewish? Do I have to die for it? And at the hands of the hunters of Jews? I think of all my former non-Jewish schoolmates. They are all safe at home and going to school. Why am I being punished for being born Jewish and wanting to live?

4

ARRIVAL IN PURGATORY

The cattle cars carrying us to an unknown destination seem like a funeral train. Few people are able to stoically endure the long train ride. The gloom, the cold, the foul odors, and the heartbreaking groans and lamentations are so overwhelming that we are all eager to reach our destination.

There is only one highlight of the journey, and it gives me a glimmer of hope. In Berlin the train comes to a stop. All of the people who are being transported from the Gestapo prison in Budapest to the concentration camp are taken from one train station to another through the city. We walk in a long column. The city of Berlin is a heap of rubble. All of us are sure now that the war is winding down, but we aren't sure we will live to see the end.

Escape during the march through Berlin is out of the question. We are very closely guarded, and the German civilians look at us "criminals" with frightening contempt. Finally, herded into another group of cattle cars, we are on our way again. We still don't know where they are taking us.

For a while, we travel through a peaceful countryside. These areas seem completely cut off from any tensions of

the war. Through a small window in the boxcar, I see cattle grazing and horses galloping around freely. There are no guards shouting at them. I wish I were a horse instead of a human being.

The train comes to a stop in a wooded area. There is nothing in my line of sight, just the forest. We are ordered off the wagons, and on foot we plod forward, driven by the shouts and whips of the guards.

Soon an immense blanket of light illuminates everything on the horizon. A forest of barbed wire is visible, lit up by powerful searchlights.

My first impression is that we have arrived at a mental institution. The people enclosed in the barbed wire area look like frightened animals. I have never seen such a sight before. Their heads shaven, wearing striped uniforms, they have an insane look on their faces. I don't know it now, but within hours all of us will look just like them, filled with fear.

The camp commandant, who is accompanied by an interpreter, comes to receive us into the camp. He warns us to observe the strictest discipline. We are not allowed to have any discussions among ourselves. Still, we have no clue that anything unusual awaits us.

Then the selections take place. I am the youngest person on the transport. When asked my age, I automatically say that I am 17 years old.

Later we allow ourselves to be stripped of our clothing. We are then ordered into the showers. We are to be disinfected and our hair shaved off. Most of the admitting is conducted by fellow prisoners, who silently go about their tasks. Božena doesn't move fast enough, and one of the prisoner guards slaps her across the face. Božena doesn't respond to the slap, but I take the woman by the shoulders and shake her. I tell her never to do that again. My shaking seems to

bring her back to her senses, and she doesn't report me to the guards standing nearby.

The weather is cold, and a wind has risen. We are still naked, standing in line to have our heads shaven. I am singled out by the SS guard who oversees the hair shaving. "Don't do this one's hair," he shouts. He moves me aside. I am forgotten about, and I become fearful about my predicament. What does he want with me? I am afraid. When he leaves the area, I go back in line with Božena. Suddenly the guard reappears; seeing me in line, he slaps me as hard as he can across my face. I feel like my eyes are popping out. Next I feel a club hitting me. It is the first time I am slapped in the camp, but not the last. I am able to block out the pain by disassociating myself from it. I'm not going to give the SS guard the satisfaction of my crying out.

My body is aching in the freezing, damp drizzle that has just started. We are given our striped uniforms-mostly rags. The tall women are given short ones, the short women get long garments. No outer garments or undergarments are issued. Our shoes are wooden clogs with an imitation leather strap across the instep. Then, we are assigned to the barracks. The misery inside the barracks surpasses anything I can imagine. I am only a young girl, shielded from most unpleasant things in my young life, entering hell.

There are rows of wooden bunks with nothing on the planks to cover them. Four people are assigned to each narrow bunk. A wooden stove in the middle of the barracks is the only heat for a thousand people. The older prisoners come by and ask us where we have come from. They want news from the outside world. When we tell them that we have come from the Gestapo prison in Budapest, one girl says to me, "You should have dug a hole and climbed into it. How could you allow yourself to be brought to this place? Do you

know where you are?" "No," I say. "You are in Auschwitz, and very few people will ever get out of here alive."

Within 24 hours we are again gathered, and those of us who survive the selections are transported again by train to another unknown place. That's when I arrive in Ravensbrück. The procedure is similar to our arrival in Auschwitz. I quickly learn that Ravensbrück is not just a camp where prisoners are concentrated to supply slave labor to the various factories surrounding the camp; it is also used as a source for medical experiments in a nearby clinic. One experiment the deportees talk about is conducted by a woman doctor. She rubs ground glass into the open wounds prisoners develop from malnutrition and then studies the effects.

I am terrified when I learn about these experiments, especially when I hear that young girls are especially targeted. I will never be free from fear.

Božena has always been clever, but she gives up hope in Ravensbrück. I decide to make every effort to stay alive, if for no other reason than to be able to tell the world what the Germans are doing to us. I am determined to be a witness to their crimes.

I curse my ancestors for having remained Jews in Christian Europe. Why? Why did I have to born Jewish? I think again of all my schoolmates safely at home with their families, warm and well fed.

The challenge that is now facing us is to remain undiminished, even though our torturers try to rob us of our human dignity every day, every hour, every minute. I soon learn that my survival depends on understanding what our torturers want and then adjusting to their ever-changing rules. Every attempt is made to make us feel less than human. It is easier for them to kill us if we feel and looked subhuman. They try to crush our spirit with their specially trained killer

dogs, held on leashes, snarling and barking at us. The SS guards dress and are groomed in deliberate contrast to how we look. Specially selected SS women guards, looking like angels, are dressed beautifully. Sometimes I feel that the guards really are superior beings. It is hard to keep our perspective, and it helps that I have my sister with me. It is harder to resist being dehumanized if one is alone. With Božena's support, I gradually adapt to the insanity.

I never seriously consider the possibility that I will not live through it. I never give up hope that, instead of being ankle-deep in mud, I will once again feel grass under my feet and sunshine on my face. I know that I must never give up the fight for my life. I feel sure that I will be a free person again.

I long to live and be able to fall in love—to be kissed by a man of my choice. I have long been greatly curious about matters pertaining to love and sex, and I spent a lot of time searching our vast library at home for anything I could find. My parents must have hidden these books well, though, because I learned only scant information from the few things that I found. The thought of experiencing romance, love and sex was a strong propellant in my drive to survive.

I develop a routine and take satisfaction from life on a daily basis. Since I cannot take a shower and clean myself—there is only dripping water from an open pipe in the latrine—I take off my clothes each morning and roll in the freshly fallen snow to rid myself of vermin. I watch the lice scampering away over the snow. I no longer shiver when I perform this daily routine. I feel the same pride in grooming myself in the camp, against all the odds, under the most adverse conditions, that I'd found earlier at home.

Inside the Heart of Darkness

We have roll call twice a day, once at dawn and once again in the evening. Everyone must be present. In each barracks, there are a thousand deportees, and there are 80 barracks at Ravensbrück. We shiver and freeze during roll calls. Regardless of whether snow or frost covers the ground, we have to stay at attention. People who are ill also must be there. Even the dead are lined up on a blanket. If anyone is missing, we have to stand, no matter how long it takes them to find the missing inmates. The count has to be correct. The SS are obsessed with keeping the records straight.

Mostly, they are concerned about escapes from the camp and also any attempts to take our own lives. If people get too close to the electrified fences, they are chased away with clubs and dogs. They don't want us to take our own lives because that would prevent them from doing it

On Christmas Eve, 1944, the guards are drunk during roll call. We are made to stand outside in the freezing cold the whole night. We only have our striped cotton prison dress on—no underwear or coats. On our feet we have only wooden clogs, no stockings or socks. Not until the following morning are we allowed to re-enter our barracks. The prisoner "capos" are our guards during the interim. These prisoners completely collaborate with our torturers and side with them against the rest of us. In many ways, they are crueler to us than the SS. Anyone not able to stand erect receives 25 lashes from the capos. They are dressed warmly, comparably to our SS Guards.

I don't know how I survive that Christmas Eve night. My sister keeps a lookout for the guards. She stands close to me and gives me warmth and courage. We are a pitiful sight in our ragged clothing, almost barefoot, and just barely alive.

It is clear that one reason for the roll calls is to break our spirit. We stand hour after hour. I envision myself ice skating to the *Skater's Waltz*. Sometimes, I practice in my head all the pieces that I used to play on the piano at home. My favorite is Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nacht Musik*.

It is during roll call that the selections are made for the various work details. The guards who carry out these selections have a wild look in their eyes. I never see any compassion, and I wonder why there are so many sadistic people in Germany. I volunteer for every type of work. Only by working is there a chance of obtaining additional food. It is impossible to survive for very long on the meager rations we receive.

In the morning, we receive a bowl of brown liquid that is called "ersatz coffee." In fact, it has no relation to coffee or tea, but it is hot and helps us to endure the seemingly endless roll calls. The noon meal consists of a bowl of soup made from a kind of turnip. Occasionally, we actually find a piece of turnip floating in it. That is the only nourishing part of the soup. In the evening, our ration is a thin slice of black bread, made partially of sawdust. On this diet we cannot survive very long. We all lose weight rapidly. Many people lose their will to live. Once someone does this, conditions are so harsh that it doesn't take them long to actually die.

My volunteering pays off. Sometimes I am sent to work in the kitchen where they prepare meals for the guards. I am able to eat additional food that the cooks, also fellow deportees, give me, and I even manage to smuggle some food back to the barracks. There I share my food with my sister and a few friends who arrived with us on the transport from the Gestapo prison in Budapest.

Selections

A woman guard walks slowly through the rows of women standing at the evening's roll call in front of the barracks. She is looking for the strongest and healthiest among us. This may be our lucky time, I think. We might be chosen and sent out of this dreadful place. Both my sister and I are exhausted from working 12-hour shifts at the Siemens Electronic Factory. Our shifts change each week from day to night or from night to day.

Roll call is over in less than an hour. I am among the group selected, but my sister is not. Božena and I look at each other as my group is herded toward the showers. Even from the distance in the evening light, I can see that she has a worried look on her face.

Our selected group consists of about 50 young women. Everyone is cheerful. They have no thoughts that there is anything to worry about. But my heart is racing because I am terrified at being separated from my sister. This is the first time it has happened since our arrival in the camps. I keep trying to think positively, but my suspicions grow with each passing minute. They become even greater when, after the shower, we are handed our new, clean uniforms. There are no prisoner numbers on them. "What can this mean?" I ask myself. We are only identified by numbers in the camp; we have no names. What kind of an assignment can we be sent to without prisoner numbers? In an instant, I make up my mind that wherever our group is headed, I am not going to be a part of it Even at the risk of being shot by the SS, I will make my way back to the barracks and rejoin my sister.

Showered and dressed in the new uniforms, we are herded outside the washroom area. We are counted again; everyone is present. The group is led by the same SS woman

as we start moving toward the gate and out of camp.

I simply lag behind and when the group is out of my vision, I sneak back to the washroom in total darkness. I find the area where the 50 discarded uniforms are lying in a pile. It takes me awhile to find my old uniform, since they all look alike, and only the numbers differ. They're hard to make out in the darkness. I finally find it. This old, dirty, lice-infested uniform seems like a treasure to me. I quickly change, trying to stay low on the floor in a squat position to be out of the light of the watchtower beam as it nears the window. Where do I hide the new one? There's no place here one can hide anything. In desperation, I stuff it into the sleeve of an old discarded uniform and slip it under the pile.

I have no plan yet about how to get back to the barracks. I am glad to have listened to my instincts and stayed behind. My stomach is aching from hunger. I have missed my meager evening meal, and I fall asleep. At four o'clock the next morning, the activity outside wakes me up. I get to the washroom door. I know that I have to be back in the barracks in time for the morning roll call.

As I leave the washroom area, I don't look left or right as I pass the guards heading for work in the camp, holding the leashes of their vicious dogs. I feel invisible. I walk confidently, as if I'm on an errand. No one stops me to ask me what I'm doing walking alone, unescorted, in the camp. When I'm near the barracks, I see the people filing out slowly and lining up for the morning roll call. My sister sees me as she comes out and stands in the row behind me.

I am scared; I shiver in the morning cold. I've been through too much since last evening. My sister squeezes my hand. She can feel my icy hand shaking. Those who have died overnight are piled up at the side of the barracks. I notice that the pile is getting higher every day.

Back in the barracks after roll call, we get our bowl of imitation coffee. I whisper to my sister to meet me in the latrine. There we sit side by side on wooden slats with round holes in them. When no one else is around, I tell her that I simply couldn't be away from her. I had to get back to her regardless of the consequences. Tears well up in both our eyes as we embrace and rejoice in our reunion.

She whispers to me, "We have to be careful; your number is on that list, and they might come searching for you."

My sister is deep in thought, and I sense that she is trying to figure out a way to get ourselves out of the camp. We march off to work with our group to the Siemens Factory. I feel fused to my sister by ties that are stronger than a child feels to a mother. She has become everything to me—my guardian angel, my mother, my hope. I know that without her I will not be able to go on.

A young Polish girl, who has been in the camp since early 1943, tells us in the evening that those who are selected at the previous evening's roll call are being used as guinea pigs in a nearby clinic. This girl works outside the camp, in the woods, cutting down trees for firewood. She learns the news from prisoners who work in the clinic. I stay quiet, and I don't say anything, just in case there is an informer among us. I am amazed how fast information travels through the camp as if there were a secret newspaper. Additional news is supplied by this same young girl night after night. The clinic is run by a doctor named Professor Carl Gebhardt, who is operating without anesthesia on his inexhaustible supply of prisoners. He amputates sections of muscle and bone and treats the infections with sulphur drugs, but he does nothing to relieve the unimaginable pain of his victims.

One of the most important highlights of life in the camps

is the way all of us are united as if we are all sisters. It doesn't matter what country one comes from; we are all related by the same goal, trying to fight our oppressors. The only people in the camps whom we have to be cautious of are the women criminals sent to the camp from prisons in Germany, where they have been serving long sentences for murder or other serious offenses. They are the ones whom the German guards use as their clones. The cruelty with which these convicts administer their positions in the camps is legendary. Often the prisoner collaborators are crueler than the SS guards. These women are never used for medical experiments. The triangle insignia on their uniforms above their numbers protects them during the selections. The other German citizens who are in the camps for political reasons, such as Communists or those in opposition to the Nazi Government, are like the rest of us. They are also fighting our oppressors in every way they can. However, they, too, are exempted from medical experiments.

Within days, we manage to get, together with 2,000 other women inmates, on a transport that takes us out of Ravensbrück.

Recently, when I returned to Germany, upon the fiftieth anniversary celebration of our liberation, a group of us are chatting in the evening, telling each other about our experiences in the camps and how we had each gone about trying to recover from our trauma after the war. A Polish woman named Joanna Muszkovska mentioned that she had spent two years in Ravensbrück. As she talked about her primary occupation there, working in the woods and cutting down trees, I realized this was the same woman who had brought us the news about the prisoners in the clinic. She was glad to hear my story of how I escaped from that selected group to be with my sister. After the war she went back to Poland

to finish her education and now works as a kidney and bladder specialist in Gdansk, Poland. She is also Lech Walesa's family doctor.

5

THE WAR IS ENDING

The war is coming to an end in late December, 1944, and early January, 1945. That is clear to us. The RAF bombers and the American bombing raids pound the area of the factory in Dortmund, where we have been sent and are working. We listen to the flying shrapnel with a mystic confidence as the bombings increase almost every day and every night. The V-2 Rocket Bomb Factory is a major strategic target. In the middle of January we spend more time in the air-raid shelter than we do in the factory.

A night of bombardment is a festive fireworks display for us deportees in the barracks and air-raid shelter. The raids give us hope that deliverance is not too far off. It is sad for me to see the condition of our fellow deportees. They are deteriorating within weeks of our arrival in Dortmund. The 12-hour work schedule, the lack of sleep, sometimes spending the whole night in the air-raid shelter, takes a toll on everybody. We have nowhere to lie down there, and we are still on a starvation diet. We are at our end.

People become uninterested in their fate. We all know that the end of our enslavement is not far off, but we've all lost vitality and are slowly dying. People's memories are fading. They're losing their ability to concentrate. I notice all this when I help distribute food in the evenings. The

deportees are lined up to receive their rations; yet, they forget what they are waiting for when I hand them their bread. I'm fearful that soon Božena and I will suffer the same fate. Though I still keep a small group in the barracks alive with food I manage to smuggle into the barracks from the kitchen, I am never sure when I might get caught, and the additional food supply will end.

Our small group is still in relatively good shape compared to the couple of thousand others. I never consider the severe punishment I will suffer if I'm caught. The benefit outweighs the risk. My father always said, "If you can save one life, it is like having saved the whole world." I dedicate myself to that effort. I'd like to see at least a few people, my sister included, manage to survive from the extra rations I smuggle into camp.

One evening, Božena says to me, "Margo, we ought to escape. If we stay, no good will come of it. We'll slowly deteriorate like the rest of the people here." Božena was assigned to office work when the staff was looking for people with perfect German language skills. Working in the Dortmund camp commandant's office, she overhears a radio broadcast that the SS guards are listening to. The announcer reads a report that the German troops are systematically withdrawing from both the Eastern and Western Fronts. Božena is clever enough to grasp that it means the Germans are being defeated on both fronts.

The Western Front is only about a hundred kilometers from the ammunition factory in Dortmund where we are still trying to work. We can almost tell by the increased bombing raids and the constant attacks on the factory that the Allies are getting closer. We now spend longer hours in the air-raid shelter. People are getting very despondent, and I try to cheer them up. They call me "the Hungarian Gypsy girl from

Budapest." I tell everyone their fortune during the air raids by reading their palms. All the people brighten up with my readings. I feel sorry for them. Children like me don't have the same fear of death as adults do. For me, it is not all that frightening.

During one night raid, a bomb falls on the shelter next to ours and kills all the male deportees in that shelter, up to 600 prisoners. They work in the same ammunition factory that we do. In our shelter we feel the impact of the bomb. People panic, but no one is injured. Our shelter shakes like it would during a powerful earthquake. Plaster is falling, you cannot see anything because the dust is so thick. It looks as if our shelter will collapse any minute also. Very quickly the guards who are inside the shelter with us get us out of there, and we return to our barracks. While going through the courtyard that separates the shelter from the barracks, we notice that several of our male guards, caught outside the shelter, were killed from the compression when the bomb fell. Their bodies are mangled, their brains spill from their skulls. This convoluted mass of white and gray, pink and yellow matter is like scrambled eggs lying on the concrete beside the bodies of the SS guards.

I am not overjoyed at seeing our guards killed. I feel a deep sadness at the loss of human life. "Is this the right time to escape?" I ask Božena. She replies, "This might be very dangerous because most likely they are sending reinforcements to replace the dead guards. Besides, we are not prepared yet. There are still some details I must work on. The next night's air raid will be the time." I leave all the decisions up to my sister. She always knows best. I really look to her as my mother and never question her wisdom.

Safely in our cots, Božena whispers, "Now we must make detailed plans for our escape. If the Germans don't

kill us, surely the bombs will." We start to plan, and we include another person who knows the area well. Maria, from Antwerp, Belgium, was with us in the Gestapo prison in Budapest. She'd worked in the German high command as a nurse, spying for Russia, until her arrest. Maria is proud of having been a spy.

She is clever and totally fearless. She works in the factory—and we need to obtain civilian clothes from the German workers there. Božena still has some jewels to trade, hidden in her vagina throughout our camp experience, just in case an opportunity should arise. Maria is our contact with the civilian workers, some of whom were brought to Germany from other countries. Those are the ones we trust the most. Not thrilled to be in Germany, they are waiting for the day they can go back to their countries and families.

Another reason we need Maria is that, though Božena and I are fluent in German, we still have a slight accent. We are fearful that if we are stopped and questioned outside the prison, our accent will give us away.

Božena finds the identity papers in the commandant's office. They are passes issued to the SS guards when they leave on furlough and don't require photographs. The guards can travel by train anywhere in Germany without having to pay. Our plan is that we will go to the city of Aachen, close to the border, and hide out in the woods until the Allied troops reach us.

Maria, our Belgian friend, manages to get three coats from the civilians in the factory in exchange for our diamonds. She is cautious and tells the workers that we are freezing in our light clothes and need the warm coats for cover. We each have a loaf of bread that I've smuggled into the barracks, we manage to get tools with which to cut the metal bars on a window in the barracks, and we have our

coats to cover our striped uniforms. The plan is that during the next night's air raid, after everyone is herded into the air-raid shelter, we will quietly stay behind, and during the fierce bombings and artillery barrage we will file through the metal bars and make our escape.

Part two of the plan is that each of us will separately find our way to the restroom in the train depot and wait for the others there. We plan to travel mostly at night. That way we will be less visible. We each have our furlough passes sewn under the lining of our coats. Finding the railway station will be our next big problem. We do not know our way around Dortmund, but from experience we know that stations are usually in the center of the city. We also know that we are taking an awful risk. If anyone is suspicious and we get caught, we will each be shot. We promise each other that if one of us is caught, we will not divulge that there are three of us trying to escape and suffer the consequences of being caught alone.

The thundering of my heart in anticipation of our escape is so loud that when the sirens go off, signaling the coming air raid, I can barely hear them. I see that Božena is under her blanket and not moving. I do the same. When the deportees have left the barracks and enough time has elapsed to be sure that our guards are in the air-raid shelters, we feel that the time has come for us to get going. Suddenly our barracks are lit up as if it were daytime. It seems as if a giant firecracker has exploded in the sky. Everything around us is illuminated.

Božena calls out softly, "Maria, Maria," to our friend. There is no response. Božena gets out of her cot and goes to Maria's bunk. Božena calls her name again, and at the same time feels the blanket where we are sure Maria is hiding. There is no trace of our friend. It appears that Maria has

taken off without us. Maybe she escaped from the factory when the workers were leaving. She has left us behind. We are only excess baggage to her.

My disappointment is great, but it is also mixed with a sense of relief. I don't have much confidence in the local population in Germany. I feel that any encounter with them will result in our arrest. I'd had an experience with them just after getting the new job assignment distributing food in the camp. I had developed a toothache, and one of the SS guards decided that I should have the tooth extracted. I was accompanied through Dortmund by two guards, one with a submachine gun and the other with a rifle pointing at me until we reached the dental office. I was wearing the striped prison uniform, wooden clogs and not much else. As people passed me on the street, they spit at me.

I have always been curious to know what they had seen in me. Did I look like such an enemy? Did I look like a murderer? When I was brought back to the factory camp, I was actually relieved to be back in prison. I had gotten used to the hostility of the guards, but the open hatred of the civilian population was deeply disturbing to me. In fact, I was devastated. I had expected that by January, 1945, the German people would have been weary of their regime. Instead, by their display of hatred toward me, I found that they seemed more than ever in accord with their government. Why else would they spit at me, a 14-year-old, skinny, innocent child? I cried as I told my sister that I had never harmed anyone or anything. How can people hate me and spit at me?

That is why I feel that now we have to avoid being seen by people when we make our escape. Just our appearance will give us away. We are so thin. People will be suspicious just by the way we look—so, I am afraid.

I am also burdened by the feeling that, had it not been

for me, Božena would have tried to escape earlier. Even after Maria left, Božena would try to go alone. But I am a weight around her neck. Božena cannot leave me behind.

Soon, the sirens signal the end of the air raid. As the deportees file back into the barracks and find Božena and me already there ahead of everyone else, and not having seen us in the shelter, they become suspicious. They accuse us of being up to something, and they fear the SS will punish them. Božena goes to the latrine and carefully disposes of the furlough papers. She tears them up into very small pieces and throws them into the filth. She wants to erase all traces of the papers. When she gets back, she whispers what she has done and says, "Now we'll have to take our chances and share the fate of all the other people here."

Božena is desolate over having been double-crossed by Maria. She blames herself because she knew that Maria is familiar with the region where we are, close to the border of Belgium and her hometown of Antwerp. Božena keeps saying, "If only I hadn't given Maria her furlough papers ahead of time and waited until we are out of the barracks and on the street, she could not have left without us." What saddens Božena most is that the plan, the furlough papers, and the jewels that purchased our coats all came from us; yet, it is Maria who has escaped. When I suggest that we try again during the next night's air raid, Božena will not hear of it. We have to lie low and wait for our liberation. We hope that in the confusion our guards will forget about us and just abandon us. We hope and we hope.

During roll call the next morning, one prisoner is missing. This time the SS guards don't make a big deal out of it. There aren't the usual reprisals against us. As the front moves nearer to us, the ground starts shrinking under our torturers' feet. They become tense as never before.

The second morning after our failed escape, we are all marched to the railroad station. We are to be evacuated ahead of the enemy advance. It is the first time our guards acknowledge, however quietly, the approaching Allies. Once again we are packed into cattle cars, more than a hundred people in each wagon, and go on a journey that seems endless.

The train stops and starts, and it seems to be going in all directions. We have to keep out of the way of the German military transports. Suddenly the train comes to a complete stop. The tracks are a mangle of steel off to the side of the road. We are assembled and counted once again. Many have died on the train, and others are so weakened they don't bother getting off the boxcars. They remain with the dead. Those deportees who cannot keep going are simply shot by the guards and kicked into the ditches on the side of the road. The rest of the journey turns into a death march.

Bergen-Belsen

I have the distinct feeling that we have been brought to Bergen-Belsen to die. Those of us who've managed to survive the death march from Dortmund, upon our arrival in Bergen-Belsen, are faced with a hopeless situation. The barracks we are assigned to are already filled with lice infested deportees in the most pitiful condition. Almost no one is able to walk upright. People move about on all fours, like animals. They no longer have any strength. I am sure that even Dante could not have envisioned a sight like the one that greets us in Bergen-Belsen. I have gotten used to horror by now, but conditions inside the barracks here are worse than anything I've seen.

People are dying. There is hardly any water in the camp, and the food supply is in total disorganization. Sanitation

conditions are horrible. In our barracks, there are only enough bunk beds to accommodate a few of those who were there before our arrival. Most of us newcomers are forced to sleep on the ice-cold bare floors. There are not enough blankets to go around. The ones available are stolen from those who die, and are full of lice. I am scarcely able to sleep at night. I am frightened and cold.

I learn from the deportees who were there prior to our arrival in early 1945 that the hopelessly overcrowded conditions in Bergen-Belsen are due to the large number of deportees sent here from Auschwitz, before Auschwitz was liberated by the Russian Army. The evacuations took place just as the Russians were approaching the Auschwitz Camp.

I also learn that the reason for all the diseases in Bergen-Belsen is the sewage running open into nearby fields. There are no plans for any of us deportees to survive. In spite of the tragedy of our situation, I don't despair. I want a chance to survive even in these conditions.

I decide that the first step I must take toward my goal is to boil our drinking water. I figure that all the water must be contaminated. I manage to make a small fire each day during the one hour between roll call and being locked back into the barracks. This task each day requires swiftness. I have trouble finding matches. I always walk around with my eyes glued to the ground, searching. Sometimes when a guard lights up a cigarette, if there are only one or two matches left, he'll throw the matchbox away. Finding such a treasure is always a great joy for me. It allows me to defy our murderers and torturers for another day. After we are locked up in the barracks again for the balance of the day (until evening roll call), anyone found outside the barracks is shot by the guards in the watchtowers.

When the wounds I got from the wooden clogs cutting

into my feet during the long death march begin to heal somewhat, I decide to look for my other sisters. If they survived Auschwitz, Agnes and Mania can be in the camp.

The task of finding other surviving members of my family requires special speed. I run from barracks to barracks, making inquiries during that short period before our lockup. Each of the barracks I visit is another chamber of horrors. All the deportees inside are on the verge of death. When I return, I recount all that I heard and saw to Božena. She does not hold much hope for us finding anyone else from our family alive here.

There are a few close friends, with whom we arrived from Dortmund, still alive. We stick very close together for support. The fast deterioration of these friends is frightening to me. Sometimes I talk to one of my friends, and when I wait for an answer, there is none. When I look closely, I see that the person I am talking to is dead. We are all this close to death.

One day, after returning from yet another barracks seeking my sisters, I have news to report to Božena. I have found some people who tell me that in one of the barracks I have not yet checked there are some people from Czechoslovakia. They arrived a few months before from Auschwitz. The people I talk with have not given me much hope that I will find any of these people alive, but now I have a method for my inquiries. First, I ask if there is anyone there from Czechoslovakia, then I narrow it down to our hometown. More of the same horror confronts me each time and in each barracks—the results of our systematic starvation.

A young girl about my age is very impressed with my efforts to find other surviving sisters in the camp, and she starts talking to me. I am glad that someone my age is now in my group. There are other children in Bergen-Belsen, some

even younger than I, but not in our barracks. Most of our friends are much older than I am. This young girl from Amsterdam, Holland, and I have a lot in common. Anne is 15 years old and I am 14. Anne is not sure that she wants to live in such an evil world. She is depressed and keeps saying, "What is the use of fighting and struggling so hard against all odds to survive?" I tell her that it is up to us young people to try to go on living. If by some miracle we survive, it will have been worth the struggle. Just to tell the world about our experiences will give meaning to our survival. Somehow I feel that my words give Anne Frank new incentive to go on.

6

ANNE FRANK'S LAST MONTHS OF TORMENT

The faint light of dawn awakens my first rational thoughts today. I try not to look around when I am awake. When I do, I am conscious of this sea of death, the living skeletons surrounding me. My sister is comatose. I wish I can get up from where I am and help her, but I am unable to stand or sit up. I am not even able to talk to anyone. The typhus has devastated my body. I am too weak to do anything. When I try to get up, I can't make it. Now I seem able to live only inside my head.

One of our mutual friends from Amsterdam, Jenny Dawidov, comes to see me today. She brings me some soup and tries to feed me. She also feeds Božena with a clear liquid. I ask her what it is. She says it will help lower Božena's fever. Jenny and her sister work in the infirmary. It seems that both sisters are immune to typhus, which is lucky for all of us. Jenny tells me about Anne Frank's and her sister Margot's deaths. They died more than a month ago. It must have been just about the time I came down with typhus. I want to cry, but that won't be enough.

With Anne's death, I feel as if a part of me has died,

too. I miss her a lot. I am beginning to think that all of us will die. I fear that the most—that there will be no witnesses, and the Nazis will get away with this terrible crime. Her friendship was like spiritual manna for me. It made this barracks more of a bearable place.

I try to remember the last time Anne and I were together.

Through our "girl talk," we manage to disassociate ourselves from this hopeless environment. We escape by telling each other about books we have read. Our escape into a world of books is our happiest time in Bergen-Belsen. Anne tells me the story of *King Lear*. I have never heard of Shakespeare before—the greatest writer in the English language. I find the story of *King Lear* fascinating. It is comforting to hear that even a great king had troubles. We are all made to feel like pariahs for having been born Jewish, but even non-Jews as powerful as a king can have problems.

Anne Frank and I talk frequently about the schools we both attended. We miss school as we both liked it a lot. Anne tells me, "Father tutored both Margot and me during our two years hiding in the attic. It was my favorite part of the evening when we sat down and Father reviewed our assignments."

My education was limited compared to Anne's, but she listens to my stories of books I had drawn strength from. We have lots of time, and our recounting of the books we have read at home is almost like rereading them. I tell her about my background, about my mother's courage, and about my belief that I've inherited my mother's strength and spirit. I relate how I had survived the Gestapo interrogations by pretending that my tongue was burned and how I'd gotten the idea from a book called *Via Mala*, by John Knittel. In the

early 40s it was a best seller and widely translated. The book is set in a Swiss village where an abusive father and husband was murdered by his children. When the police questioned the family about the disappearance of the old man, the mother took a poker from the kitchen coal stove and burned her tongue, leaving herself unable to speak or answer their questions. I used to pretend that my tongue was burned during my interrogation. It worked. I never revealed anything they wanted to know about us. These hunters of Jews were mostly interested in knowing whether we were escaping Jews trying to hide. Despite my long silences while I was being interrogated, Božena and I were eventually taken to the concentration camp. In the Nazi era, if you were against the system for whatever reason, you were an enemy of the Reich and deserved a death sentence.

Although it was never confirmed that we were Jewish, we were still regarded as enemies, for we were obviously not Nazis.

Sometimes, after a long visit with Anne, the reality of our lives in the camp comes as a shock to both of us. Often we talk about our families and friends. But talking about them makes us too sad, so we avoid the subject. At least, we are able to escape from Belsen, even if it is only in our minds.

I continue my daily search for our sisters. During one of my morning runs from barracks to barracks, I come upon a big commotion. A large group of women deportees are raiding the food supply depot. People are grabbing whole loaves of bread. I have never seen this before. The loaves are divided between 12 inmates. Sausages, cans of marmalade, even onions and raw potatoes are grabbed by everyone nearby. I join in, but am not able to get hold of much. I only get a box of grape sugar. I hide it under my striped uniform, lest anyone steal it from me. Considering how weak I am from the ongoing starvation, this is a lucky find. Now we'll have something

to put into the boiled water to make it more tasty and nourishing. We drink it hot pretending that we are drinking tea. We drink it cold when the boiled water cools. This grape sugar is a great food supplement for us.

With the ever increasing lice everywhere in the camp, I long to be able to cleanse my body. I am getting ill and food no longer interests me. I only dream of washing myself. Anne Frank feels the same way. We have to find some soap.

While dreaming about taking a warm bath and washing our hair, Anne and I talk again about books. I envy her for her knowledge of the English language. Just a year prior to our deportation, Božena and I attended English classes in the evenings. I found English a very hard language to learn. I tell her the story of Gone with the Wind. It occupies us for days on end.

One day a Gypsy woman comes knocking on the window just as I'm starting to eat my soup and a small piece of bread I've saved. She is offering me a piece of green soap in exchange for my soup. With little interest in eating, I eagerly make the exchange. The Gypsy woman quickly disappears with my soup. I hold the precious soap in my hand, and all I can think about is going to the latrines to wash with Anne and my sister.

With great effort, we get to the latrine. We have to be careful not to trip on the way and step on dead bodies. I wonder if a dead person would feel it if I inadvertently step on one. I try not to do so. Finally, I am able to try out my green soap under the dripping water in the latrine. I am waiting for it to start to foam. The soap has no smell, which surprises me. I rub it with both my hands, but it still won't foam. I hand the soap to Anne to see if she has more luck with it. When it still doesn't foam, we finally realize that our soap is nothing but a polished stone. I start to cry. This latest betrayal, especially from one of our fellow deportees,

leaves me inconsolable.

Everyone in the latrine is gathering around me. They think that Božena has fallen into the latrine and drowned. When I tell the people between sobs that I have been betrayed, no one is very sympathetic. Seeing that I am still a child, they think that I am slightly retarded to think that a piece of soap would exist in a place like Bergen-Belsen. Božena offers me some soup in the hope that I'll stop crying. I finally do, but I fall into the deepest depression. Not only are we being tricked by our oppressors and tormentors, but by our fellow prisoners as well.

Anne and I have much in common. She is my only friend of my own age. Most children our age and younger were selected for the gas chamber in Auschwitz. The false papers had my age as 17. So when asked my age, I automatically reply it is 17. Everyone in the barracks is older. The Gestapo have a system where they pay informants a sum of money for persons they turn over to be interrogated as being spies or Jews. We both were turned over to the Gestapo by someone unknown to us.

At the start of the Frank family's hiding in Amsterdam, Miep, the father's secretary, was the family's savior. But Anne felt later that Miep got frightened, for anyone caught harboring Jews would have the same fate as the Jews. They were deported to the camps.

Anne tells me, "I wish my father had not trusted her so much. I used to love Miep, bur now I wonder about her. I think we trusted her too much."

"How do you know it was she?" I ask.

"She was never questioned by the Gestapo," Anne answers. "You know how it was. Anyone found harboring Jews would suffer the same fate as the Jews. The SS always took along those who harbored escaping Jews. The SS knew that

someone had to hide us and bring us food. I would think that Miep should have been arrested."

"How do you know that she wasn't?" I ask.

"I never heard of her arrest. She should have been in the same prison we were. She was from Vienna, an Austrian. Maybe she was in accord with the Germans in their plan to kill us. She probably grew tired of having to bring us food."

"You are assuming things that you can't figure out. She probably went through a lot of trouble for all of you," I reply.

"After our arrest, we were all in shock," Anne says. "We didn't even think about whose fault it was that we were arrested. After we arrived in Westerborg, we started questioning Father about trusting Miep with all our lives. 'How could you?' my mother asked him. 'Were you lovers before Miep's marriage?' My mother was suspicious."

"How stupid and naive my parents were to trust Miep," Anne concludes.

I tell Anne my own father didn't want to go into hiding with us. He told us, "I am placing my fate in God's hands." He was sure that the war was going to end any day. My sister begged Father to join us when we went into hiding on false identity papers in Budapest. He believed the news he heard on the radio that the war would be over soon. He listened to the late news on BBC every night on a radio hidden in the basement of our house. He was very naive for a grownup.

"I guess it wasn't anybody's fault that we were arrested, yet it was everybody's fault," Anne concludes.

No matter how I try to comfort Anne, she remains inconsolable. The only time she becomes a little cheerful is when we talk about other things than how we ended up in Bergen-Belsen. I keep saying to Ann, "It is up to us young people to make every effort to survive this hell, to be able to tell the world about it."

"How could my father have made such stupid arrangements for our hideout?" Anne says over and over. "Why didn't my father plan to hide us in Switzerland? We could have been safe there. Did I tell you that my grandmother and uncle live in Zurich? I know that both my mother and father are dead by now. I saw what happened to all the older people in Auschwitz. Even if we manage to survive this hell, how will Margot and I get by without our parents? You are lucky that you have your sister Božena to look after you. She is like a mother to you."

The German language is our only language in common. We often wish that we could both speak English. That way we wouldn't have to speak in the language of our torturers. Anne's anger and depression don't improve during the time I know her in Bergen-Belsen. She is mostly angry at her father and blames him for everything. All of us are depressed in our hopeless situation. Having to come face to face each day with our own death and the death of the people who are all around us is frightful.

While Anne and I talk, Anne's sister Margot is quiet. She keeps mostly to herself and rarely participates in any of our discussions. Sometimes I ask Anne, "Why doesn't Margot ever say anything to anyone? Why is she always so quiet?" Anne says that Margot is very depressed; she was quiet even at home. "I wish I could be more like Margot; she is more even tempered than I am," Anne continues.

"How could my father imagine this place?" I say to Anne. My father was the gentlest of men, so how could he possibly imagine such inhumanity? I wonder out loud what has happened to him.

"I suspect he was killed in Auschwitz right after his arrival," Anne says, "as all the older people were. I envy him, not to have experienced the cruelty of being inside the camp.

We are completely defenseless here. Why do the Germans see us as a threat to them—to do this to their fellow humans, to have us starve to death? We are innocent people and children. I am sure that no one in the world could imagine what is happening here."

Anne is in despair one day. She is fearful that her sister Margot is dying. Margot has diarrhea, caused by starvation. We are not allowed to use the latrines at night, and they lock up the barracks. We have to be very quiet. They place a small bucket at the door for a thousand people. The bucket soon fills up. Most people have starvation-induced diarrhea. The block warden watches over the bucket. Woe to the one who makes the bucket overflow or knocks it over. The persons who commit this ultimate sin are taken outside, and we never see them again. Anne stays up most nights to help Margot. As her fear grows about Margot, her uncertainty about her own survival is fueled. She is not smiling now. Her hands are shaking. I ask her to please hold on since the war will end very soon.

Why am I saying this to Anne? I guess I am afraid for her. Margot empties her bowels in the straw in the bunk bed, for she is unable to get off the third tier of the bunk beds that are shared by four other people. Anne has to be careful that the excrement doesn't leak through the straw onto the people below. One day an inspection of the straw in the bunks takes place. We are all herded outside while this inspection goes on. The black uniformed guards find excrement in a few bunks in the straw. "Who is the swine who shit in the straw?" The block warden asks us to raise our hands. One pale young woman raises her hand and steps forward. She says in perfect German, "I needed the bucket, but it was full, and I was afraid to have it overflow. My stomach was aching. I needed to go." I had heard her during the night, whim-

pering, "I can't hold it any longer." We had to remain quiet, and I was afraid that her cries and whimpers would be heard by the guards. Then, after a while, it was all quiet—there was silence again.

I hear bones cracking. The black uniformed guards smash her head with the rifle butt.

The cart comes around that carries off the mountain of dead who are laid out. The corpses are all tangled up together. Women carry off those who died overnight for a reward of an extra bowl of soup. They gather all their strength to do this task, but their own starved-out bodies cannot utilize the extra food, and they become the next day's dead bodies. The only sound I hear is the scraping of feet as they carry off the young women on the cart with the other dead bodies. Through my tears I can't see anything more.

At that moment I decide not to speak to anyone anymore. I accept my punishment of the 25 lashes on my back when it is found out that the strips we needed to use as diapers for Margot came from the pillow case I tore up. After that morning I remain on my own. I have a lot of time to go over the events of that morning.

Anne becomes moved by what I tell her. She listens intently. No one has explained it to her that we must be brave and hold out and wait for liberation. We talk about the German guards' indifference to our suffering. To us, the Germans are a mystery. Every day our fate is in their hands, and they are completely cut off from us emotionally. "We are their victims," I say to Anne. Sometimes we even talk about divine retribution. We even fantasize about the retribution we would like to take out on the guards if we had the opportunity.

I say to Anne, "I wonder if people will believe us after the war, when we tell them what went on in this place. Even animals don't live like this. We are closed in by electrified

wire fences, so we have no chance to escape. We have no running water. The latrines are overflowing. The wind and the cold weather this year seem to go on forever. We have no protection against the cold and rain. Our shoes are mostly made of paper and rags. Our clothes are lice-infested and also in rags. People might think that we made it all up when we tell them about this place. I worry about that."

I tell Anne I can no longer help her with her sister. Why am I saying this to her? I guess I am afraid for her. I feel as if her fate is in my hands. I feel responsible for her, although I am not afraid for myself. Anne has become my sister, and my sister is threatened. She seems lonely like someone with a moth-eaten soul. I am the only person who listens to her intently. No one ever speaks to me like Anne. She has found an audience in me, like she never had before. However, I can no longer take chances for her and get punished later. My sister Božena has warned me about this. My sister implores me, saying, "Margo, you must be more careful and save yourself." As a result, I keep to myself more and gradually have less contact with Anne.

When Anne's depression lifts, she has shining brown eyes. Her hands are the hands of a musician. We talk little now. I keep telling Anne the whole world is waiting for the Nazi system to crumble, but not as we do. It is hardest for us. Therefore, we must try even harder.

Anne Frank lost complete touch with reality toward the end of her life. Most of the deportees in our barracks saw the signs of a complete mental breakdown in Anne. She refused to wear clothes. She walked around naked with just a lice-infested blanket, babbling only to herself. Those are my last memories of Anne Frank.

7

LIBERATION

Early in the morning, I hear a commotion outside my window. I cannot get up. I try, but I am too weak. I manage to pull myself to the windowsill. I want to see what is going on. The sky is raining umbrellas! I sink back to my place on the floor, convinced that I am hallucinating. The effort to pull myself up has taken all the energy I have, so I fall asleep.

The following day I hear announcements coming through the loud speaker. The announcement is repeated in every European language: "You have been liberated." I must still be feverish, I think, and now I am hearing things. I try again to pull myself up to the window. Outside there are trucks with Allied insignias on them. My mind must be playing tricks on me.

It takes me a long time to realize that we are really liberated. The camp commandant, Josef Kramer, and another SS guard come into my barracks. Kramer is still wearing his SS uniform, but this time he looks unkempt, and his rank insignia is hanging off the sleeve of his uniform. Their weapons have been taken away. They are accompanied by a pair of English soldiers carrying rifles pointed at the two Germans. One of the Englishmen shouts orders to them. "Hurry up. We don't have all day!" Silently, Kramer and his lieu-

tenant start removing dead bodies from the floor and carrying them out on their shoulders. Each time they come back for more bodies, their uniforms are dirtier and dirtier. Their faces are turning from gray to green. Now they look like the dung beasts, the name they used to call us. I slowly realize that I am not dreaming—we have been liberated. I have lived to see it!

It is April 15, 1945.

My sister lies beside me on the floor with a very high fever, too ill from typhus to be aware of what is happening.

For days, the hurried activity of removing the bodies from this barracks continues. I see some people eating food out of cans that are passed out by our English liberators. I only want a piece of dark brown chocolate. I try to share my water and chocolate with Božena, but she does not respond.

I slowly let it melt in my mouth. The chocolate tastes good. I am not hungry anymore. I learn when I am taken to the hospital that had I eaten anything other than the chocolate, the weight of the food would have lacerated my weakened stomach. My stomach would have pressed against my hugely enlarged heart. Not being greedy or hungry, I have again been saved by a miracle.

I am left in the part of the barracks with the dead and the dying. They are now taking the survivors by ambulance to the hospital. The rule is that only those who are able to walk to the ambulance are taken. Neither Božena nor I can take those few steps on our own. No amount of protest from my barely audible voice can persuade anyone to pay attention to me. I will not survive to live in a liberated world. I get very sad and begin to lose all sense of time when suddenly I see a shrunken woman, almost a skeleton, walking by me. I see her as if through the bottom of a thick glass. There is something about her eyes that reminds me of my

Bergen-Belsen, 1945 Survivors sit among the dead.

sister Agnes, and I call out her name. It takes her some time to recognize us, and then she is gone. My last hope goes with her. I pass out, but when I awake, I see the woman coming back with two other people and a stretcher. I am wrapped in a sheet like a mummy and carefully placed on the stretcher. In the ambulance, I lose consciousness again.

Arriving at a hospital, I am scrubbed down and sprayed with white disinfectant powder and carefully placed on a bed. They place two pillows under each upper and lower arm, two pillows under each upper and lower leg, four pillows under my head. My body cannot support its own weight. I have 25 pillows supporting me. I am engulfed in down.

A doctor comes to examine me. He is wearing a German Wehrmacht uniform, but he is a doctor. He has a stethoscope around his head and a white coat over his uniform. In my head, I sentence him to death and will not let him examine me. I scream out loud in my weak voice. My first scream since my imprisonment. "First, you want to kill me; now, you want to save me! I don't believe you." I think if I am liberated, why can't I see an English doctor? I see tears in the German doctor's eyes.

I am told by the nurses that there is a shortage of English doctors, and I need immediate attention if they are going to save me. "I would rather die than let a murderer touch me," I say. Later, a gentle young man appears. He talks to me in English, but I don't understand a word he is saying. He examines me and his face turns ashen. The nurses tell me they must start feeding me with baby cereal several times a day, one teaspoon at a time. I don't want to eat it. I ask for bread. I am told that I will die if I eat anything other than what is prescribed. If I don't eat the cereal, I will die. They feed me every two hours with this tasteless cereal. It is faint yellow in color. From my anus, still uncontrollable, it comes

out as green liquid, like from a swamp. It looks as if I am consuming my own body.

I ask for a mirror. I want to see myself. I want to know what I look like to others. No one notices the horror in my eyes as I look in the mirror. At first, I see a great silent pain in my black eyes. My skin is like tissue paper, almost transparent. My neck is still attached to my body, but you can circle it with one hand. The carotid arteries on my neck are sticking out; they have a pulse to them that is more like a tremble. There is still life in me. Death is doing all it can, but my heart is deaf. It keeps on beating even if it is only a flutter. I want to die.

Eating has become my full-time occupation, though I am nauseous when I eat, and I choke on the food and keep throwing up. The nurses tell me that Berlin is in flames, that the war is coming to an end, that Bergen-Belsen was liberated before the end of the fighting by a division of English paratroopers, followed by the infantry. I was not dreaming when I saw umbrellas coming down from the sky. They were English paratroopers. The population in the neighboring town of Bergen asked the Allies to liberate the area, for the typhus epidemic from our nearby concentration camp Bergen-Belsen was spreading and killing people in the town.

When I ask nurses about my sister Božena, I am told that she has typhus, but is in a different ward for those who are contagious. I am convinced that they are lying to me—that Božena has died and they don't want to tell me.

I am in an emergency hospital set up by the British liberators outside of a camp which served previously as a training facility for the German Army. I am being cared for, and I'm slowly recovering my strength. As a result of strong medications (Digitalis and Luminal), my heart is healing. Each day delegations from various countries come to visit

the ward and offer to take us back to our respective countries. When the Czech delegation comes, I don't even want to talk to them. Finally, I tell them that my family has resided in that part of the world for 450 years, and if they allowed the German invaders to take us to our death, and no one lifted a finger to save the Jewish population, I never want to live there again. They offer me scholarships and a monthly stipend to complete my education. The Hungarian Government does the same. My answer to the Hungarians is no different from what I tell the Czechs.

At the end of May, six weeks after liberation, a Swedish delegation arrives and offers to take both my sister and me to Sweden to recover our health. I need to consult with Božena; therefore, I request that, whatever her condition, I must see her before giving my answer.

A nurse lifts my skeletal body out of bed and places me in a wheelchair. I'm not aware of how thin I am, and I am amazed that one person can easily lift me out of bed. I believe the nurse must be very strong, and I silently think how wonderful it must be to be able to lift a person to place her in a chair. It doesn't occur to me that I weigh less than 50 pounds. A child could lift me.

They wheel me through countless corridors to the other end of the hospital. Finally, I see my sister after six weeks of separation, and all my doubts about her being alive vanish. We embrace and cry—each of us had believed the other was dead and that the staff didn't want to tell us.

Božena doesn't look the same. A film covers her lovely brown eyes, and her body looks devastated like that of a dying old lady. But she is alive. I can talk to her. Together we decide the best way for us to recover our health is to accept the Swedish Red Cross offer. Within a week, each of us is transported to a different location in Sweden.

8

AFTER BERGEN-BELSEN

I have an upper berth on the hospital train to Sweden. The defeat of the German army is clearly visible to me for the first time. As the train passes through the towns and villages on the way to Lübeck, near the Baltic Sea, I am only surprised that the war lasted as long as it did. Germany is in ruins. I can see the burned-out ruins of military vehicles amid the lush green vegetation along the roadsides. How could the population have tolerated the seemingly endless war for so long?

Had the war lasted just a few more weeks, no survivors would have been alive to be liberated. Most of us were at the end of our strength and our hopes. Had the war ended a few weeks sooner, neither I nor my sister Božena would have been as sick as we were. Our torturers planned for all of us to die. They wanted to eliminate all the witnesses to their crimes. They cut off our meager food portions and water supply about ten days before liberation. Had the war ended sooner, many thousands of deportees would have survived.

As evening approaches and darkness falls, I can no longer see the landscape flying by. I fall asleep until the train stops at the Lübeck harbor. I am taken off the train on a stretcher and go through another wash-down and disinfect-

ing at a nearby building. This time, however, when I emerge at the other end, I am given new clothes. Marks and Spencer, the renowned clothing store in London, has donated clothes for the survivors.

What it feels like to once again look like a human being, one who can actually aspire again to being an attractive girl, is indescribable. One of my friends on the train says to me, "You look like Danielle Derrioux." The popular French movie actress had a 16-inch waist.

These are the best words that a girl who has just turned 15 years old can hear. The only other thing I wish for is to have the strength to be able to show off my new summer outfit. I am given white crusty bread and milk. Now I can have as much as I want. I sleep on the train in the station that night.

In the morning, almost as soon as the train starts to move, it comes to a stop. What follows is the most astonishing sight. The engine—with three cars attached—is lowered from the bridge onto tracks inside a big ship. I have never seen anything like it. The technology simply amazes me. Safe inside the bowels of the ship, I envy those people who are able to climb down from the train and go up to the ship's deck. The nurse lowers the windows of the car for those of us too weak to leave our berths. At least I can get a whiff of the wonderful sea air.

A few hours later, the same procedure I witnessed in Lübeck harbor is reenacted in reverse in the harbor of Malmö, Sweden. After the cars are attached to the rails on land, the train quickly leaves the harbor. I am elated to finally be out of Germany, the home of our executioners.

We come to a stop in the center of Malmö, and I am taken by a waiting ambulance to go to my next destination. In the freshly scrubbed city, every building has a window box full of blossoms. The sight takes my mind off of my

wasted body. I notice the streets are full of bicycle traffic, with only a few automobiles. Our ambulance arrives at a convalescent hospital where the attending staff from the Swedish Red Cross is waiting for us. We are assigned beds in big wards. The doctors and nurses proceed to examine everyone to determine who is to be hospitalized and who is to remain at the convalescent home. I am happy that I don't need to be hospitalized.

Medication, coupled with sufficient rest and good nutrition, is all that I need. This is the best news for me. The convalescent home is fenced in. When I ask the staff about this, they say it is to keep away the civilians, just in case we carry contagious diseases. We are to remain in quarantine for the next six weeks. After that, depending on our health, we will be assigned to our new destination. Most of the staff have seen the newsreels of the concentration camps and are very compassionate toward us.

On the first weekend, we discover that people have gathered at the fences to see us. While I avoid encounters with the outside world, other patients in my ward welcome them, and some girls even find romances through the wire fences. In the evenings I overhear them whispering about their upcoming dates. I am a little surprised that so soon after liberation, most of the older teenage girls are more interested in finding romantic attachments than in trying to find other members of their families, but still, I wish I were older so I could take part in all that excitement.

I am suffering from recurring nightmares and often cry during the night. Though I have been liberated, I am still in the camps in my dreams. I am infected by my memories of the immediate past. Childhood years are most impressionable, and my horrors will not loosen their grip on me. The night nurse feels a special sympathy for me. She often talks

about adopting me because she has no children. Our common language is German, and though I am very grateful to her that she cares so much for me, I cannot imagine that my father would not be alive or at least one or two of my older brothers or sisters. I know that Božena is alive and that soon after quarantine I will be reunited with her. I agree, however, to spend some time with Nurse Karin after the quarantine is lifted.

One evening we plan to see an opera performance of *The Tales of Hoffman*. It has begun with a lot of anticipation. My experience of going to the theater at home was limited mostly to seeing Viennese operettas at a matinee every Saturday. The theater in Malmö is built in the romantic style with stone carvings and the architecture of the 19th Century. I really feel all grown up and dressed in my gray Marks and Spencer suit and blue suede shoes.

During the time in the concentration camp, I only heard military marching music, which we were forced to sing when going and coming to the factory where we worked. Now, the sweet music of Offenbach has such a dramatic affect on me that I begin to weep uncontrollably the minute the orchestra starts to play the overture.

My crying continues throughout the performance. I have forgotten that there is such beauty as music like this in all the world. My weeping has a life of its own, so I have no control over it. People are looking at me from the other seats near us. I feel embarrassed, but can't stop the flow of my tears. Karin's concern about me has no limit. She suggests that we leave the theater before the end of the last act, but I don't want to miss any of the music. The beauty of it simply fills my soul with sadness.

I think even Karin doesn't understand my reaction to the performance. Later, when I am able to afford it, I be-

come a lifetime lover of music and operas. I see every performance wherever I live. I always say that to me music is more important than food. It is food for the soul.

Reunited with My Sister

After weeks in quarantine in Malmö, I am transferred to another convalescent camp near Göteborg. Robertshojd is a former summer camp that has been temporarily converted to housing for survivors of the German concentration camps. At every opportunity, I tell Frü Matson, who is in charge, that I am anxious to be reunited with my sister who is in a hospital in Norrkoping. Frü Matson always has the time to listen to my pleas, but arranging for my transfer takes a lot of time, and no amount of pleading helps. The only thing I can do is to wait patiently for the approval and the arrangements that need to be made for my transfer.

After three months in Sweden, I have recovered a lot of my strength. I had lost most of my hair from the effects of typhoid fever, but it is growing back now, and late in August, I am finally allowed to leave Robertshojd. Arrangements have been made for me to be housed in the outskirts of Norrkoping at a convalescent home. The train ride to my new destination is long and tedious. It takes a whole day to get to Norrkoping, but I have a chance to try out my limited Swedish vocabulary with the other passengers.

It is almost evening when we pull into the train station. I am escorted by a lady to a waiting car and taken to my new residence. Fatigued from the exhausting day of travel, I fall into a deep sleep the minute I reach my room. The next day the bright August sun is shining in my eyes. As it wakes me up, I try to concentrate on the happy reunion I anticipate having with Božena.

As I am about to leave for the hospital to see my sister, the housemother, Frü Benson, tells me that the visiting hours are only in the afternoon. Dejected, I go down to breakfast in the dining room, where I meet all the other survivors living in this big house. I feel as if I have entered the Tower of Babel. Virtually every European language is spoken here by the 30 survivors I encounter. I am the youngest one in this new group, and everyone is interested in hearing about my survival in the camps at such a young age. However, I am in no mood to answer any questions.

My nose is pressed to the window watching the rolling hills on the horizon as the rain hits the window pane. I have three more hours before I will be able to leave for my visit with Božena. I am restless and can't concentrate on anything other than my reunion with my sister.

At the bus stop I ask a young man if this is the right place to catch a bus to the hospital. He says yes, and eventually we board the same one. I see the large hospital long before we come to a stop in front of it. I hurry straight to the reception desk and make my inquiries about Božena's room. When I learn which room my sister is in, I run toward it. In the ward, which has six beds, I spot Božena right away. She is sitting up in her bed. Her chestnut hair glistens like it has spun gold threads running through it and her checks are red. She looks well.

She's been waiting for me. We have a long and tearful embrace. Everyone in the room is wiping away their tears because they are so moved by our reunion. Božena must have told them about me.

My sister is delighted at how much I've recovered from my near-death condition at Bergen-Belsen. I marvel at her, as well. We spend the hours of our visit talking about current things in our lives. We avoid talking about the camps.

It is still too fresh, and we are both too fragile.

After our visit, as I leave Božena's ward, the head nurse, Sister Karin, stops me and says, "Fröken Wohl, Dr. Erickson wants to talk to you. He's your sister's doctor. He's asked you to meet with him one hour before your visit tomorrow." I have no idea what the doctor wants to talk to me about. Maybe he will be able to explain why it is taking Božena longer than I to bounce back to health.

The next day I follow the same routine going to the hospital, but I arrive an hour ahead of visitation time. I knock on the door of the doctor's office. Dr. Erickson, a man around 40 with graying hair and very attractive features, greets me warmly and gets to the point immediately. "Your sister is very sick and I am afraid we can't save her. We did a spinal tap on her last week, and the diagnosis is grim. Your sister has Milliard TB. It is a very rare disease, and at this time there is no cure for it. At the most, your sister has only six weeks to live."

The news about Božena's condition hits me like lightning. I shriek, the horror of the camps echoing in my cries. Then I faint. Dr. Erickson, startled by my reaction, begins to revive me. He doesn't understand my reaction. No one can except those who have been in the camps and have lost everyone they loved. It takes me a long time to regain my composure. I ask the doctor if my sister knows about her fatal illness. "We have not told her," the doctor replies. "But I think she suspects the worse. There is not much we can do for her beyond giving her narcotics to ease the pain as her condition worsens."

I am in denial. How can this be? Maybe the doctors have made a terrible error in their diagnosis. I try to convince myself of this. When I reach Božena's room, she can sense that I am disturbed and distracted. She asks, "What hap-

pened to you today? You are not like you were yesterday. You were so relaxed and happy. Why the change?" I make up all kinds of excuses and blame everything on the conditions at my convalescent home. Not able to think of anything else, I complain about my room and also the food, which really is too strange for me.

The charade of denial of my sister's illness continues between us. I never miss a day visiting with her. I don't form any friendships at the convalescent home with the other survivors. I live each day only for the few hours of visiting my sister.

Most of the other survivors are leaving Sweden. Many are Zionists going to Palestine, even illegally. The rest are returning to their countries of origin, hoping to find other surviving members of their families.

I believe it must be normal for humans to deny what is unacceptable. I look at our family and remember how my father denied the reality of the Nazi intention to eliminate the Jews until it was too late. I decide that I must break through my denial and deal with the reality that my sister cannot be saved. I determine to pay closer attention when she talks to me, especially when she tells me to formulate plans for my future before too much time passes. As we talk during our visits, I notice that she doesn't include herself when she speaks of the future. I think that she must know the truth about her condition.

One day she says to me, "You must leave Europe. This continent is a cemetery for us."

"Where do you want me to go?" I ask. "Everyone I know is going to Palestine, even thought it is illegal."

"You are not the type to live in Palestine. Most of the immigrants will live on collective farms—*kibbutzin*. You were not raised for farm work," she answers. "You have a

good brain. You must get an education so you can work with your brain. Remember how you loved school? You were a very good student, and you have to pursue your education further."

We still can't talk about the past. We are both afraid. One day a letter arrives from New York, addressed to us. "Who do we know in New York?" I ask Božena. She tells me we have lots of relatives there. It is from our uncle, Father's brother Josef. Božena remembers Uncle Josef from when he'd stopped at our house on his way to America. He asks us to identify ourselves—where we came from—and to write back to him immediately. He tells us he is looking for his family that he left behind in Slovakia. He writes that they all had their permits and ship tickets to come to the United States just prior to the war breaking out. But the war began, all travel halted and no one else made it to America.

The best part of the letter is when we learn that our two brothers, Arnost and Ladislav, are alive. They have returned to our town of Košice to wait for other survivors in our family. Božena and I are rejoiced at this good news. We answer our uncle by return mail and give him all the information about ourselves.

It is the end of September. The weather has turned cold overnight. I have to wear a coat when I go outdoors. I continue to visit Božena every day. Her condition has not improved, but it has not gotten worse, either. Maybe the doctors have been wrong in their diagnosis, I think, still trying to deny the reality of my sister's illness.

The administrators urge me to make decisions about my plans for the future. They come every week to talk to us. The convalescent home that I live in will be shut down soon, so I am encouraged to think of getting a job.

The job possibilities for us survivors are limited. With

our scant knowledge of the Swedish language and a disrupted education, our choices seem to be limited to working in a factory and sharing an apartment with other survivor girls, working for a family as a domestic, or caring for children. None of these appeals to me. Yet, I know that, since my health is better, the Swedish subsidy for my living expenses will soon expire.

October is now upon us. The weather is turning colder and rainy. The days are shorter. By four in the afternoon it is as dark as midnight. I get sleepy earlier and have to leave the hospital at a much earlier time than before.

Every day I worry. I run to the bus that takes me to the hospital and I am tired and cold. It is the end of the war, but not for me. I keep fighting to save my sister from dying, but now her condition is getting worse. Sometimes she sleeps through my visits because she is on narcotics to ease her pain. I want to die together with my sister—I think I will be dead either way. I don't ask anything for myself, only that Božena stay alive. That will be enough for me. If Božena dies, I will die, too, because I don't think there is much hope left for me without my sister.

It is the 22nd of November. I am alive, but Božena's illness has been progressing. Every day she has grown closer to death. She has been transferred to a private room because she shouts out from pain when the narcotics wear off. She has to be isolated.

I have developed a fever, and at some point in my feverish state I feel someone take me by the shoulders. It is Nurse Karin. She tells me Božena has died. "Tell your family that your sister was brave."

"But she was only 30 years old! People don't die at that age"' I cry. "I have no one—not any other family. She was my only family."

I think that now it will be my turn to die. I sink into the darkest hole I have ever been in. I don't remember how I get back to my convalescent home. Someone must have carried me. My fever rages for a month, and I am unconscious through most of that time. When I finally recover, I remember only being urged to eat and drink something by Frü Benson, the housemother. She must have been taking good care of me.

It is close to Christmas, and my fever is gone. I am allowed in the kitchen to help with the preparation of the traditional Christmas meal. I gather from others that the preparations have been going on for weeks. There are just a few survivors left in the home to attend the feast prepared for us, but I cannot partake of anything. I have no appetite. After what I have been through, I think I will be crippled beyond recovery.

Nurse Karin comes to visit me. She encourages me to come and work in the hospital. She tells me room and board will be provided for me as a nurse's aide. This is something I think I might like, so when I feel stronger, I take her up on the offer. Much still needs to be done for some survivors. Sometimes the care extends for years and many operations before they are ready to be discharged.

Until my American visa arrives several years later, I remain and work at various hospitals, helping my fellow survivors. They receive the best care because I see Božena in every one of the sick I attend, and with each patient, I feel I am helping my sister.

Eventually, it is time to leave Sweden. I go to visit my brothers, who are now living in Paris. Then, I will set off for the United States.

9

LEAVING EUROPE

There are some experiences in life that are not worth surviving. Perhaps one of them was the Holocaust. There is no medicine. It is only time that heals my wounds. If I were made out of glass, they would be visible to the naked eye. They are now covered by scar tissue that can easily break—it is very thin. Anything can open up my wounds and I'll start to bleed.

I have been left with a broken body, a moth-eaten soul, a broken spirit and a life disrupted like a tree pulled out without its roots. I have never been able to grow new roots. I don't belong anywhere.

During the first five years after liberation I live in Sweden. There I am a foreigner (an *ütlenning*). Though I learn Swedish well, accent free, they can still tell by my Mediterranean looks that I'm not Swedish. In France, I am an *etranger* (a stranger) with only a temporary permit to stay. If you have some money, you can fold it into your passport when you present it to get an extension on your visa, and the police will permit you to stay another month.

I have no money. My brothers are trying to rebuild their lives. They both love France. The French women love them. They are extremely handsome, tall and slim, with sculpted

features. Even to me, they look sexy. "What's wrong with me?" I wonder—that I have such thoughts. They teach me how to manipulate the system and get my permit to stay extended. They put up the money for it. Both Arnost and Ladislav are busy with their lives and both have gorgeous girlfriends. I feel I am a stone around their necks. I don't yet speak the French language. They won't let me date because they are fearful that I am too young and naive, that any date I accept will result in my getting pregnant. The French men are short and strong, very aggressive when it comes to sex. Even when I make a date with one of my brother's friends from home, they won't allow me to go out. No matter how I protest, they only allow me to date if they can chaperon me with their own dates. They are more protective of me than parents. I object to their strict rules and feel that at 20 years of age I can be on my own.

I try to get help in Paris by speaking to a social worker at a Jewish organization. She advises me to leave France, go to America and start a new life. I am faced with a dilemma. How can I leave the only family I have? Arnost and Ladislav don't have their emigration papers, but both of them encourage me to go to America.

Finally, I decide to do it although I don't feel happy. I wonder if I will ever be happy again. At the prefecture, the police are glad that I am leaving France. "Viola, so you'll quit living here? *Vive la France*!" they cheer. My heart is aching. I am leaving my brothers for an uncertain future in America. I think I must be crazy. I cry. My eyes are red. "When will I see you?" I ask my brothers. Arnost assures me that they will follow me as soon as they get their permits to come to America. I don't believe them because I am sure they want to be rid of me.

They both accompany me to my ship, the *SS Washington*.

It is leaving from Le Havre for the trip to New York. I am sad. I cry as I stand at the railing and look for my brothers on the shore. As we pull away, I watch them for as long as I can. Then, I look at the beautiful European shoreline until I can't see land anymore. My heart is broken.

In the evening, I go to the dining room for dinner. I don't even dress up. I just don't feel like it. The young men at my table are interested in me. I guess my beauty hides my damaged soul. I tell them I am a survivor of the German concentration camps, but they don't believe me. Beauty and suffering just don't go together. The young men feel that a girl as lovely as I am should be immune to suffering.

I won't tell anyone anymore who I really am. No one believes me, anyway. How can I separate myself from my history? We are our history. We look like our history. When I look in the mirror, I only see two very sad, very dark eyes staring at me. I never notice what men see when they look at me. Maybe it is my figure. I am still very thin because I still don't have an appetite. Thin must be in, I think.

There are some very interesting people on the ship. In my room, which is more like a dormitory, there are American women, wives of servicemen stationed in Europe. They are simple women who wear practical washable clothes. They seem to shower all the time. They wash and curl their hair every day, and then walk around all day with curlers on. No one is embarrassed. I am glad my hair is curly so I don't have to go around like they do with their curlers. They only talk to one another, and they hardly look at me. They don't even know my name. I wonder if life is like this in America. Will I be a stranger there, too—and forever?

I begin to think I've made a big mistake leaving Paris and my brothers. I should have stayed. In my mind, I am still in Europe. I am a European. I keep thinking about it. I

am sorry that I've tried so hard to survive. Who am I? I should have died with all the others. I have very dark thoughts.

I decide that I need to socialize. There is a young man on the ship who is going to teach in Japan. He has studied Japanese and is fluent in the language. He is from Austria, but too young to have blood on his hands. He was a student at the university. He is handsome and I like his company, but I don't tell him who I am. If he knew I was Jewish, I wonder if he'd talk to me. There is also an American man who wants to have a date with me in New York. He wants to take me to Harlem, but I am not sure why. I don't know any Black people. Though I really don't know much about it, I think their music is nice. If it is anything like the music in *Porgy and Bess*, I think I'll like it. I don't have a phone number to give him, so he gives me his. I am to call him when I feel like going out.

We only have one more day at sea, our fifth, before landing. I wonder if my uncle will be anything like my father. I hope that he will like me. I am so depressed and think, "Who can like me? I don't even like myself."

Over 50 years have elapsed since I arrived in the United States of America, and people often ask how I was able to go on with my life after what I'd been through. How was I able to manage it? I could tell them that I decided to put a tight lid on my pain and losses. I envisioned my history as a dirty sewer, and I managed to separate myself from it. I had a reason for this decision. I was still fighting Hitler, and I didn't want him to have any more victims than the ones he had already managed to murder and ruin.

This worked for many years, so I never looked back. The United States has been a good place for me to heal. I

often wonder if I would have healed as well had I stayed in Europe. I really don't know. All I know is that I am healed well enough after years of pain and suffering. Around the holidays I get sad when I think of the big family I had and lost. I think of how the family would have grown with marriages, children, even grandchildren. My own two children have no family beyond my husband and myself. It hurts me that their lives have been affected also by these losses.

I closed the lid on the sewer very tight. But then it became loose after many years from internal forces, and I found that we can't put a lid on any part of our lives. The lid eventually loosens and the forces from within make everything come to the surface. I cannot put the lid back on, no matter how hard I try. I go for help from time to time, but psychological counseling can't keep my dragons away—they keep surfacing at the most inappropriate times. They invade my life. I learned from my latest therapist that my dragons interfered with my willingness to undergo hip replacement surgery. To me, being off my feet for an extended period meant certain death. In my mind I became 14 years old, and the feelings I had while in the camps came back with full force. Being off my feet for any period in the camps would mean certain death. I couldn't get beyond it. Finally, I had to go for hypnosis to be able to face the hip surgery.

I have also learned after 50 years that, in order to find peace in my life, I need to write about it. That way it will be on paper and I will not have to remember it so well. This advice has really given my life a new purpose and gives meaning to my survival. I am glad to be able to pass down my experiences to the future generations.

The first step you must take is whatever prejudices you hold, you must dispense with them right now. Whomever they are directed against, you must get rid of them! We are

all God's children; no one is superior or inferior. Even if prejudice starts out small, it can grow quickly. It can gather momentum like a snowball. It can ultimately lead to the road I had to travel, resulting in pain and suffering for the rest of the life of the survivor, and it even affects the new generation. A depressed mother or father imprints depression on the brains of their children from the first day they are born, causing the children pain and suffering without them knowing the source.

People need to become tolerant of one another—without any prejudice for whatever reason, whether it be because of religion or any other trait. The road I had to travel as a child must never happen again! On the threshold of the 21st Century, we have to learn how to live in peace with our fellow human beings. We must learn the lessons from the past in order not to repeat it.

I don't blame God for having turned his face from the suffering of his children. I only blame people. I experienced the dark side of human nature. My name is Margo Guiness, and I write.

Margo Guiness stands by memorial during her return to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

EPILOGUE

An account of my first months in America could fill another book. My health still not being robust, I found it hard to work the long hours required. I was sad and lonely, but mostly I suffered from survivor's guilt. Guilt takes many forms. Sometimes it acts as prosecutor, judge and jury. In the years following WWII, when I learned of the violent deaths of the rest of my family, I unconsciously sentenced myself to penance. I recognized that the loss of my family produced a hole in my heart that nothing—not even the greatest happiness—could fill.

T. S. Eliot observed: "Humankind cannot bear too much reality." I was silenced when I wanted to speak about my experiences in the camps. My uncle and I didn't get along, for I had great conflict in remaining a Jew, when being a Jew had bought me so much pain. I am against organized religion, for it has caused a lot of violence through the ages.

I am aware that I still keep a part of my life hidden away in the sewer. I go there infrequently because I am always afraid of the ghosts that lurk there in the darkness—never more keenly than when my husband, who feels my fears, whispers to me, "You are safe now," as he holds me in his arms when I cry in my sleep.

I am uncomfortable with the designation of Holocaust survivor. And I have a distaste for victimhood. Therefore, I forged ahead and tried to achieve some sort of success. I was able to start and operate my own business, "Margo's Salon de Beaute," at a very young age. I met and married a man who coincidentally was a pilot in the United States Air

Force during WWII and who completed 42 bombing missions over Ploesti, Romania, to destroy an oil refinery where the German Army got their major fuel supply. I settled into marriage—hoping, but not sure, that I could still have a family after all I'd been through. Luckily, we have two children: Andy, who was named after my mother, and Ava Suzanne, named after my niece who perished in Auschwitz.

I managed to be admitted into college without a high school education by passing an equivalency test. Later, I attended Toronto University. I think, of all my achievements, I enjoyed that part of my life the most. In the past 20 some years, I have been a successful real estate broker until my retirement.

My understanding of what it means to have been born mortal began only in the past few years. I experienced the fragility of life with numerous hip revision surgeries, culminating with an open-heart valve replacement last summer. I was able to find gifts hidden along the way on this journey that taught me what really matters in life. All my previous values that I had held dear—like possessions, vanity, money—fell away like leaves from a tree in winter.

Dr. Scott Peck, a psychiatrist in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, talks about all of life being a journey of learning. We go through experiences from which we need to learn. It seems that I have learned a lot in my journeys, but we cannot learn anything easily. Only in times of crises do opportunities arise that offer us insights about ourselves and the meaning of life.

Having experienced how fragile life is, I understand that life is truly a gift. Not every one of life's journeys is necessary for growth. Sometimes they can lead us to dead ends. I am referring to my concentration camp experiences. I feel that whatever I learned there, I needed to unlearn—and recover trust and faith in my fellow human beings.

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